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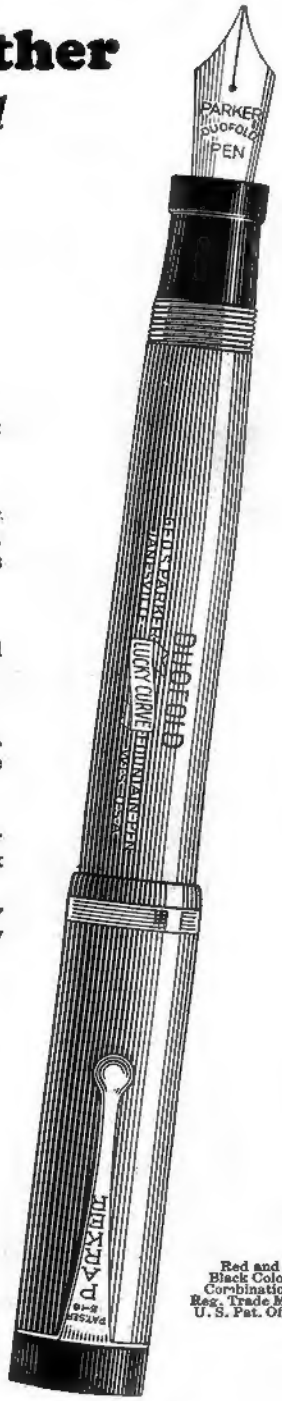

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Disappearing Bullets

By GEORGE J. BRENN

EXPERIENCE SMITH, master detective, looked pointedly at the man seated opposite him.

"Let's get down to business," he suggested. "When did this trouble of yours start?"

"About two weeks ago," said Bradley.

"Some one telephoned my home at Westbury about midnight. Told me that I would be shot while I was breakfasting. I hung up the receiver and returned to bed. Thought it was just a crank or practical joker. Next morning a bullet pierced the window of my breakfast room, on a level with my head!"

"What!"

"That's not all," continued Bradley nervously. "It never touched me, and we couldn't find a trace of it, other than the hole in the glass. The whole room has been examined minutely, but we are unable to find that a bullet has lodged in the walls or furniture. The hole in the window pane is about the size that a .38 caliber bullet would make."

"What did you do?" asked Smith.

"I was about to look out the window for the person who did the shooting, but Bernice, my daughter, restrained me. She persuaded me to go to another window to look out, assuming that it would be less dangerous. There wasn't a person in sight, however."

"Strange," commented Barnes.

"Fairly strange," drawled Smith. "What else, sir?"

"The same thing has happened half a dozen times since. First there would be a threatening telephone call, advising me of the hour at which the shot would be fired. The strange voice would say: 'The bullet will not touch you *this* time.' The manner in which it was said would lead one to believe that on some subsequent occasion the bullet *would* touch me."

"Always the same voice?" asked Experience Smith.

"Yes. I have no doubt of that, but I can't seem to place the owner. There is a slight imperfection or impediment in his speech, but I don't know how to describe it. It's not a lisp or a stammer, nor is it due to inability to pronounce certain consonants. The only way I can describe it is to say that it is a 'thick,' imperfect or slurred pronunciation of almost every word, although what is said is always intelligible enough."

"And has this feller made good his threats every time?" questioned Smith.

Bradley nodded, emphatically.

"He surely has! There are two other holes in windows at Westbury. There is one in a library window in my home in Park Avenue. Another is in the plate glass window of my office in the Corinthian Building. Do you wonder that the thing is driving me mad?"

"No need of bein' alarmed, yit," encouraged Experience Smith. "Any demands been made for money, or anything like that?"

"None," answered Bradley.

"Any idea of the reason for the attacks?"

"None," repeated Bradley.

The telephone on Barnes' desk rang, and the telephone official answered it.

"Yes, Mr. Bradley is here," Barnes announced. "No. He won't talk over the telephone to anyone." Barnes listened for another minute and hung up the receiver.

"Was that right?" he asked, turning to Bradley. "I understood you to say that you've given up answering your telephone."

"I've *tried* to," said the financier, wearily, "but it's almost impossible to transact business without it. That call may have been from my office, or it may have been from that —man."

"It was, Mr. Bradley," said Barnes. "I don't wish to alarm you unnecessarily, but your Unknown says he is going to launch another harmless bullet in your direction."

"I thought so!" muttered Bradley.

Smith sauntered to the window nearest Bradley and looked out. They were fifteen stories above the street. He could look out on half a dozen skyscrapers. Far below was the seething bustle of down-town New York.

"Come away from there, Experience!" cautioned Barnes.

As he spoke, there came a sharp impact against the window pane,——

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Weird Tales

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THROUGH *the* VORTEX

by DONALD EDWARD KEYHOE

"Seeing the mad, malignant grin which spread over the other man's face, the flyer made no attempt to move, knowing that it would but result in his death."

THE silence of tropical midnight had descended upon Tenjo, the rugged little peak which crowns the island of Guam. Far below its steep slopes flickered the crude torches of a few Chamorran fishermen, where the lazy Pacific merged obscurely under the moonless sky with the jutting coral reefs. Near the tip of the peak stood the tent of an outpost commander, where two men sat conversing in low tones.

"Kent, I'll swear it's not my imagination!" muttered the smaller of the two, a thin-faced, nervous man wearing the bars of a lieutenant. "I know—you think I've gone mad, as Tyndall and Haines did up here. But you're wrong; it isn't Tenjo, this time at least. The sound I've heard is real. My blood runs cold every time I hear it—it's not human!"

Captain Richard Kent, the young commanding officer of the Marine Air Station, laid his hand soothingly on the lieutenant's shoulder.

"I don't doubt your sanity, Alcott," he replied in a calm, self-possessed manner which was in strong contrast to the other's apprehension. "I believe you have heard something strange, but I don't understand its coming from the sky. You say it has

happened at the same hour every night?"

"Yes, just about at this time," returned Alcott with a shudder. "I heard it the first night I pitched my tent here. That was two weeks ago. I haven't asked the sentries if they've heard anything, for I don't want them to think I'm crazy already. Besides, I don't believe it can be heard down there, for the only night I've missed it was last Saturday when I was inspecting the returning liberty party. But the thing has got on my nerves so much that I had to tell somebody."

Kent lit a cigarette, the flare of the match throwing his clear-cut features into relief against the darkness of the night.

"I'm glad you picked me," he observed. "There's seldom any excitement here, and if a mystery comes up I want to—what's the matter?"

Alcott had leaped to his feet.

"Listen!" he whispered in an awed voice, staring up into the starlit, tropical sky. "There it is now. Don't you hear it, Kent? That awful, wailing sound?"

The cigarette dropped from Kent's fingers as there came to his ears a faint shriek, indescribably weird and mournful, from some point above him in the heavens. In the instant it changed to a horrible, discordant frenzy that sent a nameless dread surging through him, though in volume the sound had not increased. Then the cry was gone, to be succeeded by an odd, rushing noise. In a moment this also died out and the night was as silent as before.

Kent stood paralyzed for a second, the memory of that sinister cry still numbing his faculties. Then he shook himself impatiently and began a swift search of the purple dome above. But in vain, for there was not an object in sight large enough to blot out even the tiniest star. He turned in silent wonder to his companion, whose eyes seemed about to bulge from his head.

"You heard it?" demanded Alcott hoarsely. "Then I'm not going mad. Thank God for that!"

"You're sane enough," said Kent. "But what could it have been? Alcott, you're right. There was nothing human in that sound."

"It's uncanny," agreed Alcott in a fearful tone. "I thought at first it might be some super-airship which we hadn't heard about over here, but it's not likely to be passing every night at the same time."

"No airship ever sounded like that," stated Kent positively. "Besides, we could have seen it easily. No, whatever made that shriek was not connected with man."

"What do you mean?" asked the other tensely. "You don't mean anything supernatural?"

The flyer stared out into the darkness a full minute before replying, his eyes roaming across the hollow which separated them from the cliff.

"Not supernatural," he responded at last, "but unnatural. The superstitious Chamorros would chalk it up to Tatamona, their 'devil of the night'. But we must look for a logical explanation, even though one seems utterly impossible. *Something* happened up there tonight, that's certain; and I'm going to find out what it was!"

Alcott opened his lips to speak and then broke off abruptly, jabbing his finger over Kent's shoulder.

"What's that?" he exclaimed breathlessly. "Behind you . . . look!"

Considerably startled, Kent whirled about. A shapeless white object floated slowly to earth a few feet away. He took a hurried step forward and bent over, flooding the ground with light from an electric flash. Then he laughed in sudden relief.

"It's just part of an old newspaper, probably carried up from your

camp by a gust of wind. I thought ——Good Lord! Come here, Alcott! Quick!"

The lieutenant knelt hastily. As his eyes rested on the point indicated by Kent's outstretched finger he gasped and a look of absolute amazement spread over his pinched face.

"*New York Times*, March 5, 1925," he whispered to himself. "But it can't be . . . it's impossible, Kent! That's today and New York is eight thousand miles from here!"

"There's a difference of a day in longitude," Kent reminded him, "but even at that, this paper was printed less than forty-eight hours ago. Read this."

He spread the battered sheet upon the ground.

" 'Inaugural ceremonies broadcast over entire continent,' " he quoted rapidly. "The inaugural was held two days ago, so this paper was printed within that time."

"But how could it get here?" cried Alcott in bewilderment. "How could such a thing happen? That sound tonight—do you think it could be connected in some way?"

Kent seemed not to have heard him. His face was turned upward with a curious expression, as though he sought to wrest the secret from the far-off stars. When he glanced back there was a peculiar gleam in his eyes.

"Don't mention this to anyone," he directed in a firm voice. "I want to compare this paper with the cable and radio news. I'll call you the day after tomorrow unless something occurs sooner."

"What do you think might happen?" queried Alcott eagerly, as Kent started down the rocky incline.

The flyer paused.

"Perhaps anything — probably nothing," he replied enigmatically, and then went on down the trail to his motorcycle, leaving Alcott staring after him.

CLAD in an electrically heated flying suit, Kent climbed into the special high-altitude VR which had been hauled out under the floodlights of the seaplane hangar. After a careful inspection of the supercharger, his oxygen tank and mask, and the connections to his suit, he nodded to the waiting mechanics. The propeller jerked through a quarter-turn, caught the spark and then spun dizzily as the powerful motor roared into life.

Beyond the ring of bustling mechanics stood four officers, their faces extremely grave. A minute after Kent had opened the throttle for warming up, the youngest officer ran to the side of the plane.

"Captain," he pleaded earnestly, "give up this dangerous flight, or else wait until daylight so that we can look out for you. The westerly winds higher up are almost certain to carry you away from the island."

Kent smiled, but shook his head in quiet determination.

"I appreciate your interest, Henderson," he said kindly, "but I have a particular reason for this 'hop', and daylight will not do. So stand clear, old man, for it's 10:30 and I'll have to be getting under way."

Henderson stepped back reluctantly. The VR slid into the channel with a splash, rode free of its truck, and after reaching open water hurtled into the night under Kent's skilful hands. Once clear of the surface, Kent jerked the releasing handle he had ordered rigged for the pontoons. The plane lunged upward as the two heavy floats dropped into the bay. The flyer settled back with a grim smile. The VR would go higher than ever before without that weight. As to the hazard of alighting without that gear—well, time enough to worry when that moment came.

The plane climbed with incredible speed. In eight minutes the altimeter showed ten thousand feet. The night was cloudless, so that flying was com-

paratively easy. Kent glanced at the dash clock. It was ten minutes to 11. Guam was still in sight, though the searchlights of the Air Station were now only points of light. He was circling in wide upward spirals, holding the nose of the plane to its maximum climb. At this rate he would be higher than forty thousand feet by 12 o'clock. Loss in weight from used gasoline would compensate for the slower rise in thin air.

At the thought of attaining such a height a thrill shot over him. Even now he hardly knew what he expected to find in the blackness above. However, in another hour he would be close enough to learn the explanation of the amazing events on Tenjo.

The island was now invisible and he was forced to depend on skilful piloting to remain within gliding distance of that tiny dot in the Pacific. As the rare air began to affect him he adjusted the oxygen mask and turned on the tank. Though the altitude brought a bitter cold, he was not uncomfortable, for the heated suit was quite efficient.

Half an hour dragged by, bringing a slight nausea from the artificial air and the growing strain. Kent's eyes began to ache dully from the constant inspection of temperature and pressure gages. The VR performed faithfully, its variable pitch propeller biting steadily into the thinning air.

At thirty-five thousand feet Kent felt a sudden desolation sweep over him, a belief that he had overestimated his ability to find the island he had left. At this altitude he was in the high wind belt; even now treacherous currents might be carrying him silently, relentlessly over the open sea. He headed the plane east to counteract such a drift, the VR moving sluggishly under his cramped fingers.

Twelve o'clock. Half dazed, Kent stared from the clock to the altimeter. Forty-three thousand feet! No man had ever before reached that height. But his triumph was short-lived, for an odd sensation quickly claimed his attention. The VR was rising swiftly on a vertical air current. He shook his head dazedly. At this altitude there should be no such currents. Then a numbing dread seized him as his eyes fell again on the altimeter. The hand of the dial now stood at forty-four thousand—and it was moving rapidly! As he stared, horror-struck, it reached forty-five . . . forty-six. . .

Something was drawing him upward into space!

With shaking hands he attempted a steep dive, but though he tilted the plane with motor full on it still rose. Gravity had ceased to attract him! Lost to all human control, the VR continued to hurtle upward at a speed beyond his power to estimate. Through the heated suit swept a grim, pitiless cold, penetrating to the very marrow of his bones. Though he opened the oxygen valve wide, breathing became an agony. As a last resort he switched off the motor, but it was useless. Spinning dizzily, the plane continued upward, while he clung futilely to the control stick.

Suddenly on his tortured ears struck a new sound, drowning the shriek of the wires in a flash—a frenzied, awful moan which grew with startling rapidity into a fiendish din, utterly unlike anything he had ever heard . . . but *was it?* The night before on Tenjo—that sound!

To his fast-failing consciousness came one thought. The force which drew the VR upward was a tremendous suction, the suction of some colossal maelstrom, in the center of which the tiny plane whirled helplessly, like a storm-tossed leaf.

The blanket of darkness lifted abruptly and a lurid, ugly glow appeared directly above. Terrified, Kent beheld a vast, ring-shaped opening in some strange formless land ap-

parently suspended in the air—an opening fringed completely with smoldering, sullen fires. As he gazed in stupefaction the whole ring flared angrily to white heat, a million tongues of flame leaping toward the middle of that great red circle. Then, as quickly, the fires died to their ominous, somber glow.

The air, which had been incredibly cold, grew warm and thick. The discordant din became even louder, sending stabs of pain through Kent's eardrums. He wondered dully, why he had no power to move, to escape the stupor which enveloped him. Was this some mad dream? But in the instant his wonder was forgotten; there came a blistering, hellish heat, heat that crumpled him to the floor of the cockpit, searing his lungs, starting his eyes from their sockets in mortal agony. The VR had plunged headlong into the center of the fiery abyss!

A single muffled cry burst from Kent's scorched throat, past his cracking lips, as a new idea forced itself upon him. That upward flight had been but madness—in truth he must have fallen back upon the earth, and was now being hurled to an awful death in the crater of some unknown volcano!

He caught the smell of heated metal, as the blistered paint exposed the duralumin wings of the plane to the inferno. His flesh seemed about to shrivel on his bones. There came an instant of stark, raving fear . . . of pain beyond human endurance, and then the torturing heat was gone as swiftly as it had come.

Half fainting, Kent hauled himself to the level of the fuselage and thrust his face over the side. What new madness was this? The smoldering fires lay far below, and on all sides were steep cliffs that completely enclosed the space through which the VR still rose. From the walls yawned great caves, their dark recesses hidden from the ring of fires by wide ledges which protruded outward a hundred feet. A shadowy *something* moving on the nearest ledge took Kent's eye. Then an incoherent cry left his lips as he saw that every ledge was alive with hideous monsters, creatures of a forgotten age, from whose mighty throats came the horrible sounds he had heard. Misshapen heads reared upward from loathsome bodies as the plane passed and the maddening, tremendous chorus lessened in volume for the moment.

Soul-sick, Kent shudderingly broke the spell of gruesome fascination that held him and raised his eyes to the region above the caves. The VR, which had slowed perceptibly, was nearing the rim of this gigantic, bottomless pit. As he drew level, Kent saw that outside the rim lay inky blackness. Yet there was land below, he knew, for the pit must have a base of some kind, and in addition he remembered having seen something extending away from the vortex into which he had been sucked.

The VR, apparently free from the strange force which had caused its ascent, ceased to rise at three hundred yards above the rim. Seeing that the plane was about to fall back into the pit, Kent drove his exhausted body into action. Shoving the stick forward, he kicked the rudder to the right, hoping to gain speed either by a dive or by falling off to the side. For several seconds there was no result, then there came a welcome rush of air on the controls. With a sigh of relief, he neutralized the rudder and sent the VR into a glide over the rim into the darkness. As he descended he became aware of an odd, clammy mist, which obscured his goggles and made his nostrils smart. He had pulled the oxygen tube from his mask on realizing that good air lay at the top of the rim. Now he replaced it hurriedly. Through the thickening haze he saw a few pinpoints of light

beneath. Releasing his safety belt, he stood erect, hoping to sight a cleared spot near the lights. Failing this, he reached for his rocket pistol, in which were two white star rockets. With a pull at one trigger he sent the first rocket hissing out from the plane. It burst with a lingering flare, illuminating an irregular surface covered with shrubbery.

Kent saw that a hard landing was inevitable and pulled the VR up into a stalling glide, the plane settling slowly. Then he started in alarm, as he recalled the dropped pontoons. Even they would have been better than the wings for that first contact with the ground.

Off to one side he saw a peculiar structure, raised above the ground by some kind of framework, but before he could look farther there came a sharp crack as the starboard wing struck some obstacle. The VR swung about violently. Forgetting the open safety belt, Kent hauled back on the stick with one hand and then placed the other before his eyes. There was a splintering crash as the propeller dug into the ground, a jolting bump, and then the plane pitched over on its back, catapulting Kent into the air. He had a confused sense of falling . . . a stunning blow . . . and then a merciful, soothing oblivion.

"Two o'clock!" exclaimed Henderson anxiously. "Something's happened, that's certain. He'd be back now if he were all right, for he must be out of gas. I'm going to get out all the boats."

But though every officer and man joined in the frantic search for the missing plane, there was no trace found of Captain Richard Kent. Headquarters officially listed him as lost at sea. As the days passed there was no one who did not admit his death, except perhaps a lonely man on Tenjo, who sat silently at his tent . . . wondering . . .

2

As consciousness returned, Kent struggled to a sitting position. His body was bruised painfully and his head throbbed from the blow it had received, though it did not seem to be cut. The mist which he had noticed in descending was even thicker, and an experimental sniff caused him to replace his mask and goggles. The noise of the pit was now barely audible, and the walls of that singular place were hidden by the gloom. He was about to strip off his clumsy flying suit when a strange, husky voice sounded a few yards away. Turning cautiously, he peered through the hedgelike shrubbery over which he had been tossed. Then he sat paralyzed with astonishment.

Around the wrecked VR crept a score of squat, powerful figures, their long arms holding torches of some luminous substance which gave off no flame. Kent saw that the continual mist was green, and that the apelike features of these queer beings were crusted with a greenish crystal layer. Heavy, matted beards accentuated their weird appearance. They were chattering to themselves in some fantastic tongue unknown to Kent, but he guessed that they were intensely excited over their mysterious find, and were equally fearful of getting too close to it. At last one who towered a foot above his fellows motioned the others to follow, adding a wrathful imprecation as they hesitated, and advanced with upraised club as though fearful that the VR might spring to life.

Kent considered hastily. The plane was not entirely beyond repair, and if it were to serve him further it must not be damaged by these ape-men. Yet he feared to face them without a weapon, for there was a fierceness about them which was far from reassuring. Seeing that a slight depression hidden by the shrubs offered concealment, he crawled as close to the

VR as possible without being seen. There was an automatic pistol in the cockpit which would make him master of the situation if he could reach it. As he lay watching the ape-men through a gap in the tangled growth he saw a flash of light on some shiny object a yard away. Then he recognized the rocket pistol and almost shouted in exultation. The ape-men were grouped about the plane, their backs toward him, so that he was able to secure the pistol without being seen. Snapping back the trigger on the single remaining charge, he leaped to his feet just as the leader of the group thrust his club cautiously into the side of the plane.

"Stop!" he shouted, more for the effect he knew it would produce than with any intention of being understood. With hoarse cries of astonishment, the ape-men whirled about, and with the exception of the leader fled into the undergrowth. Their swift retreat puzzled Kent for a moment. Then it dawned upon him that the grotesque mask with its huge goggles probably gave him an extremely startling appearance. Pressing this advantage, he strode majestically toward the powerful brute glaring at him from the side of the VR. The ape-man swung back his club with a ferocious cry, and stepped into a clearer space as though ready to give battle. A stream of unintelligible sounds flowed from his snarling lips, and Kent caught a swift side glance. He guessed that the leader was ordering his frightened comrades to close in. If he were to succeed he must work rapidly. Raising the rocket pistol menacingly, he dashed toward the ape-man, who gave back a few feet as he had expected. Then he whirled about and flung himself under the overturned plane, searching hurriedly for the holster holding the automatic. For an instant the creature opposite him stood bewildered, then with a bellow of rage he ran forward, followed by several of his band who had regained their courage. Without hesitation Kent leveled the rocket pistol straight at the ape-man's face and squeezed the trigger. With a loud report the rocket struck full in the mouth of the infuriated brute, and before he could claw the hissing thing from his throat it exploded its second charge, sending a sheet of yellow flame belching from between his tortured jaws. Falling to the ground, the stricken creature writhed for a moment in his death-throes and then was still.

Kent had by this time secured the .45 automatic, but it was not needed, for at the spectacular destruction of their leader the rest of the ape-men hastily disappeared. The crackling of shrubbery testified to their complete rout. Working quickly, the flyer now secured the remaining rockets and cartridges, stuffing them into his flying suit. By the light of a torch the ape-men had dropped, he removed the tool kit, the radio set and batteries, hiding them carefully under a particularly dense bit of undergrowth.

This done, he set off toward the structure he had seen in landing. Though he kept a close watch for lurking ape-men, he was unmolested and in a few minutes he came out upon a clearing bordered by an irregular fissure in the earth. In the center of this clearing stood the most unusual building he had ever seen. Sixty feet above the ground, and supported by the cross girders of what appeared to be the skeleton of a great dirigible, was a house shaped somewhat like a boat, with portholes for windows, and a wide platform or balcony running completely about it. The framework had been cut in two parts so that a gap existed between the portion supporting the house and the portion which trailed off into the shadows. Soft light streamed through the green-crusted ports, and once a figure passed before one of these openings.

Though Kent looked closely there was no apparent method of reaching this astonishing building. Even had he not been weakened by the ordeal he had been through, he could not have climbed the girders, for the intermediate sections had been removed, and those remaining had been filed to a razorlike sharpness.

While he stood there he heard a tumult in the darkness behind him. Recognizing the voices of the apemen, he abandoned caution and shouted toward the platform above him. Almost at once a door was flung open and three figures rushed out. He saw an elderly man, whose hair shone white under his torchlight, a second man of his own age, and a young girl whose beauty in those bizarre surroundings was startling.

"In God's name!" gasped the elder man in good English, leaning down to stare at the flyer. "Who are you—and how did you get here?"

A great wave of thankfulness swept over Kent. At least he was not isolated from his own kind.

"Let me come up there away from these green devils," he replied, pulling aside the breathing mask, "and I'll tell you anything. But if I don't make it in a minute I'll collapse."

There was a hurried exchange of words above and then the younger man appeared with a long rope ladder, which he hastily lowered. Kent made the ascent with difficulty, for he was almost at the breaking point. He was quickly escorted into the main room of the building, which, he saw, had once been an airship cabin. It was comfortably furnished, to his surprize, though part of the material was evidently the result of days of labor. Other doors led to smaller cabins, joined together by roughly built passages. The girl, under direction of the white-haired man, set about relieving Kent's fatigue and sponging off the greenish deposit which had seeped in about his face. Refreshed by a drink of cool, clear water, and a dish of strange but delicious food which his host called *kornu,* the flyer then briefly explained the events which had ended in such a disastrous manner. The girl showed an unrestrained interest in Kent's story, but the younger of the two men displayed a sullen indifference which Kent was unable to fathom. The elder man listened thoughtfully, with a start of excitement at his mention of the newspaper which had been found on Tenjo.

"And now," said Kent, when he had concluded his story, "tell me where I am, for I'll admit I am lost for an explanation."

The old man raised his head and looked with compassion on him.

"If it would serve any good purpose I would spare you that knowledge," he answered sorrowfully. "My son, there is not the slightest chance that you will ever return to that place which we call the earth!"

Stunned by these amazing words, Kent sank back in his chair, gazing at the speaker in consternation.

"So that you will not doubt what I say," went on the other, "I shall explain who we are. As you are an aviator you will probably remember the airship *Fidelis.*"

"Not the dirigible that was lost in 1919?" stammered Kent. "You mean this——"

"Is that ill-fated craft," finished the old man calmly. "Or rather, what is left of it. You perhaps recall that there were several American passengers on board when it left England for Berlin? Well, we are the survivors—we three Americans. I am Alexander Faire and this is my daughter, Madeline. And this is Hugh Fletcher; Hugh was traveling with us as my secretary when we made that unfortunate voyage."

"But the *Fidelis* crashed at sea," protested Kent. "The wreckage of

the control car was found off the coast of Spain. You are all supposed to be dead."

"The control car was wrenched off in the hurricane," admitted Faire. "That is how the officers and crew lost their lives. Then some of the passengers jumped in parachutes. From what you say none of them escaped death. I suppose they were drowned. At any rate, the airship rose to a great height because of its decreased weight. Had it not been for the first officer of the *Fidelis*, who was in the passenger cabin when the storm struck us, we should have perished. He made the cabin airtight and released oxygen from the emergency kit so that we were able to breathe. Even then the cold almost finished us. At last we were caught in just such an eddy as drew you here, and were wrecked upon this spot. We did not pass through the pit, however; I think some counter-current carried us here. There were five of us alive when we landed, but since then one has died from illness and another at the hands of the Tortas."

"Tortas?" repeated Kent.

"You called them ape-men," explained Faire. "There are several hundred of them here. They have the instincts of animals but human intelligence of a low order. Probably they would be pounced on as the 'missing links' were they back on the earth."

"You have not told me where I am," Kent reminded him. "What is this terrible place?"

"It is the Sargasso of the air," stated Faire solemnly. "You have been dropped upon a small aerial island, which we call Suferno, an island formed in countless centuries by bits of matter carried into this meeting-place of the winds. Forced into a compact mass by the perpetual pressure of the whirlpool, and buoyed up by terrific forces of the winds, it actually withstands the earth's power of gravity. Oh, I know it is incredible! But it is true. As you know, the easterly movement of the earth results in a constant westerly wind, the speed of that wind increasing with the distance above the earth. At some point the rotation of the globe ceases to drag the surrounding air after it, and the winds may be said to stand still. Yet in relation to the earth that point is speeding by at about nine hundred miles an hour. We are at that point, in the center of that mighty vortex, where the winds of the world spend their force."

"I can not believe it!" cried Kent, when Faire had concluded. "No power of winds could uphold such a great mass as this. And even so we should die from cold and rarefied air. Surely you are mistaken—we must be in some forsaken spot on the earth."

Faire smiled pityingly.

"You are wasting your time in fighting the truth, Captain Kent. Do not think this is a haphazard opinion. While on the earth I spent years in the pursuit of scientific knowledge, and I am the last one to accept a theory which is not clearly proved. I can answer any objection you make —though God knows I would be glad to believe I am in error. The force you deprecate is an almost vertical one, as you know by the rapid rise of your plane. Remember, it is the reaction of currents moving at nine hundred miles an hour and meeting counter currents with such speed as to create an everlasting eddy. The compression of air by those winds makes it denser than on earth, and the heat is supplied by the friction of scouring currents under the base of this strange place. That heat is sufficient to keep the base of the pit in a state resembling that of molten metal. I wonder that you escaped with your life."

"But why has this formation never

been seen on earth?" questioned Kent. "At most it can not be more than twenty-five miles above the higher observatories."

"You have answered yourself," replied Faire. "Its very closeness causes it to pass with such speed that it is but a fleeting shadow across the lens of any telescope. It is like an airplane speeding at three hundred miles an hour a few yards above your head. Your eye could not catch its passage. No, there is no mistake, nor do I believe that we shall ever regain our lost world. Your coming has created a tiny hope, however. Until this time I have thought that nothing ever escaped the suction of Suferno. The finding of that newspaper would seem to indicate otherwise. Though we can not be certain, there was probably a cyclone, or similar disturbance, near New York or at a spot where that paper had been discarded. It was evidently drawn up into this place, or else on the edge of the whirlpool, and then dropped by some opposing current."

"But how is it that no one else has ever heard the sounds from the pit?" asked the flyer.

"You mentioned a circular depression near the place where you stood," said Faire. "It is well known that sound waves can be caught and reflected, even though from great distances, by just such hollows. You might have been at the focal point of the depression. Perhaps there is no other spot on earth fitted for such reception, at least along the track which we may be said to follow."

Kent fell silent. Was this amazing explanation possible? But if not, what could explain the circumstances?

"I don't understand how you contrived to build this place by yourselves," he said at last. "And how do you get food and water without exposing yourselves to the Tortas?"

"They thought we were gods when we first came," answered the scientist. "They gave over one of their villages to us, but it was a bunch of filthy, underground affairs, so we decided to build a regular home. Luckily one of the motor nacelles contained a full set of tools. We managed to unbolt or cut away that part of the framework we did not need, so that it could not be a convenient path for reaching us. We saw that there would be trouble later, so we made the Refuge, as Madeline named it, as safe as possible. The girders are filed so that even the Tortas can not climb up. They do not understand making such things as ladders, and so we are fairly secure.

"When Collins, the first officer, died from fever, the Tortas saw that we were mortal, and immediately attacked us. However, we had an old revolver with a few cartridges, so that we were able to drive them off. But they are our enemies and we have to watch them constantly. As for our food, we go out occasionally for raw supplies from which we make up various concoctions. Some are quite palatable. But it is dangerous and lately we have started bartering with the Tortas for these things. They are extremely interested in getting bits of silk, which we have stripped from the *Fidelis*, and a few trinkets which Madeline makes for that purpose."

The girl interrupted for the first time.

"I am so tired of seeing that old silk," she exclaimed. "Our clothes did not last long, and we have been making things out of this colorless silk ever since. I suppose we look like convicts to you."

She laughed at her last words. Kent looked at her in frank admiration.

"Hardly," he said, smiling, "unless I change my present impressions of convicts."

Then he turned back to the scientist, and in so doing missed the pecu-

liar expression which flitted across Fletcher's stolid face.

"Is there water on Suferno?" he inquired. "Surely there are no springs?"

"We catch the rain, or mist, which you have noticed," said Faire. "At first we had to drink it with only a slight filtering, and it was nauseating. The green crystal it deposits is somewhat like sulfur in taste, though not in chemical action. However, I have a combination filter and still rigged up which turns it into good water. You must see my laboratory later on. Hugh and I have just completed the manufacture of a high-power explosive. We call it *teolin*. With several small bombs of that we shall not fear all the Tortas on Suferno."

"If this place was formed as you believe," remarked Kent, "how did it come to be inhabited by these strange creatures and by those terrible monsters in the pit?"

Faire hesitated for a moment.

"I can explain it only by evolution," he said at last. "You may not believe in that theory. Under our feet are tons of matter lifted from the earth by an everlasting process. It is my belief that this life originated from protoplasms carried here in that matter. At any rate, life certainly exists. The Tortas fear the things in the pit as much as we, however, so we are doubly protected. They call them the Vangæ, according to Hugh here, who has mastered their weird lingo. As long as these strange animals do not find any way into the flat land outside the pit we are safe. I believe, though, that their caves and tunnels run far back, perhaps under the spot on which we live."

As he fell silent Madeline spoke eagerly to the flyer.

"Won't you tell us what has happened in the world since we left?" she pleaded. "It seems almost a dream that we ever lived there, for these six years have been ages."

Though he was tired, Kent complied willingly. Faire soon cut in on the recital.

"You forget, Madeline," he told the girl, "that Captain Kent has had a trying experience. You can talk of these things later, when he has had a good rest."

"It must be near morning," said Kent, as he rose to follow his host into another cabin. "Everything will doubtless seem more cheerful in sunlight."

Faire shook his head morosely.

"There is no day or night here," he observed. "Except for our *forlite* torches, made from a luminous weed, no light rays penetrate this everlasting green mist. I think it must absorb all light rays from outside, for the darkness is never lifted. As for the time, we have a ship's clock which was not damaged, but it is of little use to us."

He conducted Kent to an inner room and bade him good night. Within a minute the flyer was fast asleep.

3

FORTY-EIGHT hours had passed since Kent had crashed on the aerial isle of Suferno. He had recovered from his strange experience, most of which now seemed a dream, though he had but to look through the screened ports of the Refuge into the perpetual night to assure himself that it was no fancy. Faire had proved an interesting host, an earnest scientist whose intellect had stood up well under his isolation. Madeline was a charming companion, doubly so because of her eager interest in Kent's descriptions of conditions in the world hidden below them. Fletcher maintained a cold reserve which the flyer at last decided was due to the loneliness of months on Suferno.

The Refuge was an interesting habitation. The little cabins made novel quarters and the furnishings from the salvage of the *Fidelis* afforded quiet

comfort. Numerous *forlite* torches illuminated the structure with a soft, pleasant glow. The central cabin even boasted a small library, which had been carried in the passenger compartment of the airship. At the rear of the Refuge was a combination storeroom and laboratory, where Faire spent a great deal of time in various experiments. As Kent was being conducted through this room he noticed several coils of wire and stopped abruptly.

"What is it?" asked Faire in surprize.

"I had forgotten my radio set," explained the flyer. "This wire brought it to my mind. I ought to get it in here at once, before the Tortas stumble on the place where it is hidden."

"Why do you want it?" asked Madeline. "You don't mean that you can send a message to the earth?"

He shook his head.

"No, it is not a transmitting set. But unless it is badly damaged, and its cushion supports should prevent that, we can listen in and tell just about where we are in relation to the earth."

A scornful laugh from the doorway interrupted him. Fletcher had entered and stood there regarding them morosely.

"How can you do that?" he asked insolently. "A wireless message might come from any place. Even if you heard it you couldn't tell where it came from."

Kent chose to ignore the other's tone. He smiled easily.

"What you call 'wireless' has undergone some changes since you left the world," he said. "It is called 'radio' now, and there are thousands of stations all over the globe, broadcasting musical concerts, plays, speeches, political conventions, and a hundred other things. At any hour of the day or night you can tune in on something interesting. And by use of what we call directional antennæ it is easy to get the line of transmission."

Even Faire was amazed at Kent's explanation, while Fletcher lapsed into an ugly silence.

"And to think," cried Madeline breathlessly, "that in a few hours we may hear voices from our long-lost world. Oh, I hope the set will not be broken!"

"We'll soon know," said Kent. "I'm going out right now to get it."

He headed for his cabin to prepare for the trip.

"Wait a little bit," Fletcher called after him. "I've just put up a signal for the Tortas, showing that we have some things to trade. When they come I'll find out how they feel. They may be worked up over your killing Karn, their chief. If everything is all right I'll go out with you."

Half an hour later, in response to a string of *forlite* torches displayed from the Refuge, a dozen Tortas appeared. Donning a crude helmet and mask to keep out the green mist, Fletcher strode out on to the platform. His appearance was the signal for a chorus of hoarse gutturals from the fierce-looking creatures below. Then began a rapid conversation, accompanied by a series of gestures by Fletcher. The negotiations concluded, there came an exchange of silk and trinkets for several baskets of supplies the Tortas had brought, the baskets being drawn up by hooked lines. The other three castaways remained inside, peering through the ports, Faire explaining that Fletcher was the only one who seemed to effect an understanding with the ape-men.

"I think it is safe to go out," observed Fletcher as he entered. "Karn was a bullying sort, and they seem glad to be rid of him. You had better put on your mask and goggles."

"I'll take my gat, too," remarked

Kent. "It's an effective argument against any number of clubs."

Fletcher turned to the scientist.

"I'd better take our pistol, too. You can't tell about those devils."

Thus equipped, the two men descended the rope ladder and made off into the shadows. Their torches showed the way plainly, and the VR was soon located. It seemed not to have been touched, though Kent was not sure. Kneeling beside the shrubbery where he had concealed the tool kit and radio, he found that they also were intact. He drew the set out quickly and bent over to examine it when he felt a swift jerk at his holster and looked up to find himself covered by his own and Fletcher's pistol.

Seeing the mad, malignant grin which spread over the other man's face, the flyer made no effort to move, knowing that it would but result in his death. Fletcher laughed sneeringly.

"So you are going to take my Madeline back to earth with you, Captain Kent? I think not—in fact, I am quite sure of it."

Then, without moving his eyes from the flyer, he lifted his head and uttered a peculiar call. Almost at once they were surrounded by a group of leering Tortas who seized Kent and bound him with a long, ropelike vine. Though he struggled, he was like a child in their powerful hands.

"And now," said Fletcher with a mocking smile, "in order to lend color to my little story of your tragic death, I shall have to use some of your ammunition. But then you won't need it, anyway."

Raising the pistol, he fired several shots into the air. The Tortas dropped to the ground in terror, but at a command from Fletcher crept to their feet. Fletcher's voice took on a note of bitter hatred.

"You fool!" he snarled. "Do you think I can't see that she is falling in love with you? Do you suppose I have waited all these years for nothing? What do I care about going back to the earth? When old Faire kicks off I can be king here, for these damned brutes are afraid of me because I know their language and can frame up things on them. And I'll have her! What more do I need to be happy? Yes—when old Faire is gone—and that may not be so long distant, either!"

He snapped a curt order, and Kent was roughly dragged to his feet. Then, with his lower bonds loosened, he was forced to march along an upward winding trial. Steeper and steeper became the path, while Kent cursed himself bitterly for not attempting an attack before the Tortas bound him. As a dull glow appeared above he had a sickening foreboding. They were going to throw him into the pit!

With the strength of desperation he broke for an instant from his captors, but before he could hurl himself down the precipitous slope the Tortas in the rear threw themselves upon him with angry cries. But for Fletcher's interference, he would have been torn to pieces. A minute later he looked for the second time on the weird, firelit walls of the space through which he had come to Suferno.

"You are going to have a new experience, Captain Kent," gloated Fletcher. "An experience no man has ever had—though our dear friend Faire may soon taste of its joys. Do you see that ledge below us?"

Kent looked and his heart went sick within him. A great, sinister form was plainly visible, though its features were obscured in shadows. One of the Tortas produced a long coil of the tenuous vine such as that which bound Kent. This was slipped under the prisoner's arms and firmly secured. Then he was carefully lowered over the rim, Fletcher's exultant

laugh following him in his slow descent. He closed his eyes in despair for a moment. Then, forcing them open, he looked down upon the ledge Fletcher had indicated. His body, which had been dangling limply, began to sway slowly from side to side, making of him a human pendulum. He saw the reason instantly. The ledge did not extend out far enough to intercept him, and the Tortas were endeavoring to swing him over it so they could drop him upon it. At the same time a new sensation came to him. The vine-rope was scraping against something. An upward glance showed where it was chafing against the side of the cliff. A jerk told him of a parted strand. He was still fifty feet above the main ledge, but there was a tiny projection less than four yards beneath. If by a miracle——. His breath caught in his throat as he felt another strand break. Then a sudden rending and he was dropping, feet first. An agonized second and he landed with a jolt that almost drove his legs from their sockets, his head hanging over the rocky shelf.

By twisting about he was able to look up toward the rim. The spot from which he had come was hidden. Fletcher could not know the outcome of his inhuman scheme. Undoubtedly he would believe he had succeeded. Probably he had, for Faire had said there was no passage from the pit to the open land of Suferno. Nevertheless, Kent felt renewed hope as he began to work his bonds loose.

When he had freed himself he sat up and inspected his surroundings. At the back of the ledge was a small opening, barely large enough to permit his passage. He crawled into it for a few yards and stopped. It had turned abruptly, leaving him in abysmal darkness. Then he forced himself to go on, for it was his only chance, even though he might fall at any moment into some deep cavern. There was a dank, musty odor in the air which increased as he went along. He proceeded cautiously, feeling his way in the blackness. The passage grew larger and in a minute he came to a fork. He chose the right branch and soon saw a glimmer of light. Forgetting caution, he ran toward it and in a few seconds found himself at the rear of the very ledge on which Fletcher had intended him to fall.

Stretched full length lay a gigantic creature, resembling a lizard in form but with a huge, bulging head unlike anything he had ever seen. Its legs were twelve feet in length, and its scaly, mottled body was at least fifty feet long. Kent recalled with a gasp the skeleton of a prehistoric dinosaur he had seen in a museum. But for its head this monster would be one of that species. Beyond the passage he had followed, a second one opened, wide enough to admit the gruesome occupant of the ledge. Scattered about the floor of the cave thus formed were mangled bones of great size. Evidently in the caverns under Suferno were other strange animals, prey for this creature and its kind, the Vangæ.

Though the eyes of the creature were open, it did not seem to see Kent. A transparent film covered the hideous yellow slits, whose fierceness was emphasized by white rings encircling them, like the eyes of a horse violently distended. He found himself moving forward as one hypnotized and stopped with a jerk. As a stone rattled under his feet the film lifted swiftly from the serpentlike eyes and with a mighty, bubbling scream the Vanga lunged to its feet, darting its head downward with incredible speed. Kent whirled in blind terror as he saw the cavernous maw open and two great fangs shoot out toward him. The hot breath of the monster sped itself after him as he flung himself to safety at the turn of the passage.

Hurrying back to the fork, he entered the left side. To his delight it soon turned upward. Perhaps there existed some tunnel which would take him into the open. There followed an hour of disappointments. The tunnel led to others, confusing him so that he became completely lost. Once he heard a muffled roaring, and guessed that he was near some great cavern where the Vangæ congregated, or perhaps prowled in search of food.

Retreating, he was about to give up in the exhaustion of all hope, when a draft of cool air struck upon his face. Tracing its source, he came on a slanting wall at the top of which a faint gleam of light straggled through. Rude steps had been cut in the slope, so that he was able to reach the top. Pushing his way through a thick mass of undergrowth which closed the entrance, he found himself not a hundred feet from a Torta village!

Evidently this passage was not known even to the ape-men, for it showed no sign of use in recent times. Kent felt a great relief. He could lie here until rested, and then search for the Refuge. Crawling a little closer to the village, he saw that the huts were in reality caves with raised, thatched tops. The inhabitants entered on hands and knees. It was fairly well lit, for an especially large growth of *forlite* bushes existed at this point. He saw that a conference of some kind was in progress between the males, the females being kept below, as far as he could observe.

The conference ended suddenly, and three of the Tortas picked up their clubs and torches, starting off into the mist. A thought struck Kent and he quickly circled the village, following as close as he dared. Luck was with him, for the three ape-men went straight to the Refuge, where they bellowed a loud call. After a wait, Fletcher appeared. Kent felt his pulses leap as he saw Madeline and Faire peeping out from the doorway. He stole closer, keeping in the shadows. The Tortas seemed to be demanding something. He heard Fletcher ask some question of Faire, but could not catch the words.

"No!" exclaimed the scientist, firmly. "What can you be thinking of, to make peace with them after the murder of Captain Kent? After this I shall treat them as the animals they are!"

Fletcher spoke again to the Tortas, who replied with a fierce hubbub. The three Americans on the platform disappeared and the Tortas slunk away with angry mutterings. Kent shrewdly conjectured that Fletcher had promised the ape-men a reward for helping him carry the flyer to the pit, and that his mention of a peace-offering was a subterfuge to deceive Faire. An anger mounting almost to murderous hatred took hold of him. Then he calmed himself and tried to think of some way to reach the Refuge.

At last a plan occurred to him. If only Fletcher had not found the tool kit! He had forgotten to mention it in connection with the radio. Hastily he searched out the trail to the VR. To his joy the tool kit still reposed in its hiding place, though the radio set was gone. Taking out two Stillson wrenches, he went back to the Refuge.

When he felt sure no one was stirring above, he stripped off his uniform blouse and tore it into large pieces, one of which he tied about each hand. Adjusting the wrenches to a small grip, he forced one on to the nearest upright girder. By stepping on the handle he caused it to lock without slipping. He nodded in satisfaction, and placed the second wrench two feet above. The strips of cloth kept the sharpened edges from cutting his hands, though they bit through the outer layers. Slowly he worked his way up on this improvised ladder, changing each wrench

with the utmost care, lest some sound warn Fletcher or a loose grip send him hurtling to the ground. At last he hung beneath the platform, where he was forced to trust himself to the strength of his tired arms. After a great effort he swung his body over the edge and lay panting on the floor.

When he had regained his breath he tiptoed to the nearest port and looked in. The central cabin was deserted. He pondered a moment. The door was barred but if he waited for someone to open it he might encounter Fletcher fully armed. The sight of Fletcher's club in the corner of the cabin decided him. Stepping to the edge of the platform he hurled himself against the door, which burst open with a loud crash. Then, seizing the club, he dashed for Fletcher's room. As he approached, the door opened hastily and Fletcher appeared, a pistol in his hand. At sight of Kent a gray pallor overspread his face and he raised the gun in his trembling hand, but before he could pull the trigger Kent brought down the club on his outstretched arm, sending the weapon clattering to the floor. Dashing the club aside, Kent swung to the other's jaw with a blow into which went all the pent-up rage of the past hours. Fletcher collapsed with a gurgling moan just as Faire and Madeline rushed out.

As the girl's eyes rested on Kent she gave a little cry and would have fallen had he not caught her. Lifting her tenderly, he carried her to the couch in the central cabin, Faire looking on speechless.

"I thought you were dead," whispered Madeline dazedly, her eyes hungrily searching Kent's face. "Hugh said the Tortas——"

"I know," cut in Kent grimly. "But it was a frameup. And he is going to pay for it."

At his explanation Faire's brows grew black with anger, while the girl listened wide-eyed.

"So he must be put out of here," concluded Kent. "Not for what he did to me particularly, but because neither you nor Madeline will be safe if he is allowed to stay. He planned to kill you, Faire—of that I am sure. You can guess the rest."

"I trusted him," said the scientist slowly. "I never suspected him for an instant. But you are right—he must go out with the Tortas, since they are his friends. It will mean redoubled watching on our part, for he will organize them against us, but it is the only way."

"We need not fear him," said the flyer. "He will have no tools to work with, and I shall warn him I intend to shoot on sight if he comes near the Refuge. I shall carry him out at once, for we are not safe with him here.

And Fletcher, still unconscious, was carried by Kent down the rope ladder. There were no Tortas in sight, so Kent gave a piercing whistle to call them. Leaving Fletcher on the ground, he returned to the Refuge and drew the ladder up after him.

"LUCK is with us once more," announced Kent, straightening up from his inspection of the radio set, which Fletcher had carried back to the Refuge. "Two tubes are in working order, and as this is a reflex circuit we'll have the strength of three tubes when I change the connections a bit."

Two hours later he closed the battery switch and eagerly rotated the dials, while Faire stood by the huge loop they had constructed. Madeline watched with rapt interest. After several minutes Kent's eyes dilated with excitement.

"Hold it there!" he cried to the scientist. "We've caught something. It's an orchestra . . . ah! he's going to announce."

There was a moment of strained silence.

"WRC—Washington!" he exclaimed at last. "Write down these settings, Madeline. And get the angles on the loop, too, both the vertical and horizontal, for we'll need them."

The loop had been made so that it could be rotated in two planes, giving its deflection toward the earth when lying on its side.

"But this may be coming from a long distance," said Faire, anxiously. "We may be miles away, perhaps nowhere near the Atlantic coast."

"We're within fifty miles of Washington," replied Kent decisively. "I know this set, and it wouldn't come in this loud any farther away. Here, listen for yourself."

Removing the headphones, he handed them to Faire. Seeing the wistful look in the girl's eyes, he drew one phone from the clips and for several minutes the scientist and his daughter listened to the music which was being broadcast from the capital. There were tears in the eyes of both when they turned to Kent.

"It is wonderful," breathed Madeline. "A great invention—but more wonderful because it gives us back our world. I shall never be lonely again."

"It may give us back the world in a very literal sense," remarked Kent. "I have a plan which may be worked out, but first we must determine exactly how we move above the earth."

Taking the phones, he began the hunt for a second station.

"Charlotte, North Carolina," he stated in a few minutes. "We must be somewhere between there and Washington, for the vertical angles are almost in line and the horizontal angles are in opposite directions."

For three hours this process was repeated, during which time more than a hundred stations were picked up and carefully recorded, with the time of reception. Then Kent shut down the set and bent over a world map which had been torn from an atlas in the library.

"We are over the Pacific," he explained to the others. "There won't be anything but a ship or two for a long time, and we couldn't know their locations so we might as well trace our passage across the United States. By plotting the angles on stations which we caught at about the same time we can get a fixed position for that instant."

He began work with pencil and rule, while Faire read the angles.

"There are four stations on which the loop pointed straight down," he continued. "That is, the vertical angle was ninety degrees, indicating that we were directly over the stations. These four were WBBL, Richmond; WEAC, Columbus; WOC, Davenport, and KEPT at Salt Lake City. The curve drawn through these places shows that we touched first at Cape Hatteras and then moved in an upward arc across the country, our highest point being just south of Sioux City, Iowa. From Salt Lake City we curved back southward until we reached the Pacific, just below Monterey Bay, California. And, judging from the intersections of the inclination angles, we are about ninety thousand feet above the earth."

Faire scrutinized the map closely.

"This arc must pass through Guam," he remarked, "since you were caught up at that point. A continuation of the curve will cut through Singapore and then dip down below the equator. From that it would appear there is a second arc which covers the Indian Ocean, crosses Africa just above Cape Town and then swings up between Africa and South America until it begins at Hatteras again."

Kent nodded.

"I think you are right. I can't understand why we don't travel in a straight line around the earth, or

rather, why it doesn't move in that way below us, but undoubtedly there are many conditions affecting the winds up here which we can not comprehend."

"You spoke of a plan," suggested Faire. "I confess to being a skeptic, but I would like to hear it, anyway."

Kent's face was grave. He hesitated, looking at Madeline in some doubt.

"I don't wish to frighten you," he said finally, "but I believe that we shall have to prepare for an emergency. Of course you have noticed the crack in the ground which lies just beyond the framework of the *Fidelis*? Well, when I climbed across it the last time it seemed to have widened and become deeper. I have an idea that we are on the outer edge of Suferno, and that the tip of ground supporting us is being slowly broken off by the vibration from the center."

Faire's face was pale. He glanced quickly at the girl.

"I have suspected something of the kind," he admitted. "There seemed to be no remedy, so I never told Madeline. Hugh learned from the Tortas that large portions of Suferno have vanished in just that way. What happens to them after they break off I do not know."

"I believe they fall toward the earth," said Kent. "Perhaps the mass disintegrates, or it may be taken for part of a meteor if it strikes inhabited land. This particular strip may not break off for a long time, but we ought not to take a chance. How much silk have you left in the storeroom?"

"Several rolls, though I don't know exactly how much," answered the scientist. "What good will it do you?"

"We'll build an air-tight box," explained Kent quickly, warming to his subject as he went on. "We can make it from six-ply veneer, which is light but strong. The base will be reinforced to hold the three of us. We can leave space between the inner and outer walls, and pack it with *nottok* pulp, which I remember you said was a poor conductor of heat. Now for the silk. If it is not rotted we can make five parachutes, one for the center of the box, and one to be held by an outrigger arm on each corner so that the 'chutes won't tangle when they open. The four will have to be small and the central one will be very large. I'll sneak out to the VR and bring in the oxygen tank. There is a little left in it, and we can make more in your laboratory."

Faire and the girl were staring at him dazedly.

"I don't believe it will work," objected the scientist, after a silence. "If this bit of ground tears loose we shall be milled around and our box would be smashed to pieces. Besides it would have to be kept in an open spot far enough from the *Fidelis* to fall free, and the Tortas would wreck it for us."

"It is the only possible way of escape," said Kent, somewhat impatiently. "I can manage to keep it a secret from the Tortas and Fletcher, and as for our milling around, it would be only in the air and the box would stand the strain."

"Oh, if we only could get away!" exclaimed Madeline. "Father, let us take the chance of being killed—even that would be better than staying here the rest of our lives. Somehow I believe that it would succeed."

Faire at last agreed, though he was far from convinced.

"Even if we fall free, and escape the vortex," he protested, "we may drop into some ocean or the middle of a wilderness. Except for the time when we are over the United States our track lies almost entirely above water."

"I know," said Kent in a troubled

voice. "That is the only thing I fear. Yet I see no way around it."

"If there were only some way we could make the ground break loose," said Madeline thoughtfully, "we could start at a definite time, for now we know just when we are over the States."

Kent sat up excitedly.

"That's a great idea! Why didn't we think of that, Faire? By heaven, we can do it!"

"How?" demanded the scientist.

"*Teolin!*" replied Kent enthusiastically. "We'll plant several charges of it far enough away to keep from blowing ourselves up, but close enough to break off this tongue of land. We have some spark plugs from one motor of the *Fidelis*, and even if they aren't any good we can fall back on those in the VR. We have plenty of wire and I can rig up a booster strong enough to fire through three or four plugs. We'll wait until we are just off the Atlantic coast and then throw the switch. It will take about an hour and a quarter to drop, if our parachutes open at once. We'll be sure to strike land then. We'll check up by radio to get the exact time on our clock."

Faire seemed to catch some of his enthusiasm.

"Wild as it sounds, I believe it is possible," he said. "Let's get to work right away."

5

"THERE is only half an hour left," said the scientist, unconsciously lowering his voice from suppressed excitement. "Now that the time has come I am tortured with a thousand new doubts."

"Don't worry about it," counseled Kent, striving for a cheerful tone, though he too felt the gravity of the moment. "We had our close call yesterday when the *teolin* exploded."

"Thank God it was only a small charge," exclaimed Faire in a fervent voice. "I still fail to understand how *forlite* can ignite it. I have always thought of it as being without heat or fire, and the possibility never occurred to me. It is a wonder we have not had an accident in the laboratory."

Three weeks had passed since Fletcher had been exiled from the Refuge. At first the three castaways proceeded cautiously, keeping close watch for the outcast or lurking Tortas, but when nothing unusual happened they decided Fletcher was kept busy at the Torta villages organizing his new subjects. By this time the parachute box had been completed, and had been carefully lowered to the ground. The two men then moved it on crude rollers to an open spot three hundred yards away, where heaped brush and the intense darkness concealed it from wandering ape-men. Every ounce of *teolin* Faire had manufactured had been placed in sloping pits dug for this purpose. The wires from the spark plugs were led into the parachute box and connected to an induction coil which Kent had wound for use with the radio battery.

"It is strange that we have not been hindered by Fletcher," observed Faire thoughtfully, as he put on one of the rough coats of silk lined with *nottok*, which they had made for resisting the cold. "It is not like him to forget what we did to him. I am afraid of the man, for he is extremely cunning."

"I think he is simply saving his skin by staying at a safe distance," replied Kent. "We have the pistols and he knows we will not be slow in using them. Well, we had better be going or we shall have to wait another twenty-four hours."

With a last farewell to the Refuge, which had so faithfully lived up to its name, they descended the rope ladder. After a keen scrutiny of the surrounding area for skulking ape-men,

they set off toward the odd craft to which they would soon entrust their lives. Removing the brush around it, Kent opened the little door and made a last inspection of the oxygen system and the reinforced glass port. Madeline entered first, making a brave effort to hide her natural agitation. The two men followed and secured the door with stout turnbuckles installed on all four edges.

"It is only a few minutes from the time we figured," announced Kent rather nervously. "That amount won't make much difference—let's throw the switch now and have it done!"

Before the others could reply there came a thud against the door, as though some solid object had been placed against it. Then a raucous, triumphant laugh. Fletcher's voice! Consternation swept over the three in the box.

"Greetings to you, my dear friends," they heard in mocking tones. "Surely you didn't think to leave me without even saying good-bye?"

Kent quickly regained his poise. After all, he held the whip hand.

"You are playing with death," he shouted back. "In fifteen seconds I'm going to blow this box and everything near it into space. You have just that time to get clear!"

"How very interesting," retorted Fletcher tauntingly. "But I am afraid I must disappoint you, my dear Captain. I would suggest that you try your little plan—while I stand here and wait to be blown into smithereens!"

A chill premonition swept the flyer. He seized the switch and closed the blades. Nothing happened. Consumed with sudden anger, Kent snatched up his automatic, and as Fletcher's sneering laugh came again aimed directly at the location of the sound. The roar of the shot filled the tiny box. Then rose a scream of pain from the outside.

"Damn you, Kent!" shrieked Fletcher. "You got my arm—I'll have you beaten to death for that . . . *Cheurge gaar khrotee!*"

The language of the Tortas! In an instant the air was filled with the hoarse cries of the ape-men. After an interval Fletcher's voice was heard again, this time from a greater distance, and muffled in some way to prevent detection of its source.

"One more shot like that, Kent, and both you and Faire will feed the Vangæ. And this time there'll be no slip. If you give in you'll have a chance to live—under my command. I want Madeline—and I'm going to have her. Even if you break out of that box you can't save yourselves, for I've got a hundred Tortas here, and after your ammunition is gone they'll finish you with clubs. The Refuge is in my hands—thanks to the ladder you left so conveniently at hand. You are fools—all of you—to think I'd let you escape like that. My men have been watching you every hour since you put me out—damn you! Your *teolin* is on its way to my headquarters and the spark plugs are in my pocket."

Kent remained grimly silent, waiting for Fletcher to approach closer so that he could try another shot. Without their leader the Tortas would be easier to handle. Faire had not spoken a word, but was trying to quiet the girl, who was sobbing in terror at Fletcher's mention of her.

"Pass your guns out through that port!" snarled the man outside, after a short wait. "Break the glass and then throw them clear. If you don't I'll——"

What he intended was never known, for just then the ground shook under a mighty explosion some distance away. Kent's hopes leaped, but sank again as the box remained immovable. The commotion outside

the box proved that Fletcher and the Tortas were as startled as the three prisoners.

"Probably the Tortas carrying the *teolin* got too close to some *forlite*," ventured Faire. "It won't help us, though. We should have stayed in the Refuge, for now we are lost."

"Not yet," answered Kent firmly. "You have five cartridges and I have two magazines left. We'll get through somehow."

At a touch on his shoulder he leaned down toward Madeline. Her voice came in a whisper, close to his ear.

"Kent, dear," she faltered, adding the endearment for the first time, "I am afraid there is no hope for us. Promise me one thing—that you will not let him take me . . . alive."

Something caught in Kent's throat and unchecked tears sprang to his eyes. For a moment he held her close, while love struggled with a great bitterness against the fate which was about to snatch this girl from him at the instant of victory. Then he dropped his head sadly.

"I promise," he told her in a low voice.

But now a new and ominous sound was added to the husky shouts of the Tortas and the angry commands of their white leader. Kent's emotion was forgotten as he recognized the never-to-be-forgotten moans of the dread Vangæ! In a flash he understood, and for the first time absolute despair overwhelmed him. The explosion they had heard must have torn away part of the pit walls, or had created an opening into the subterranean lairs in the bowels of Suferno, letting the Vangæ forth to wreck and destroy all in their path. Nothing could save them now!

Closer and closer came the hideous screaming, the blood-curdling cries of the monsters. A torch dropped near the port by a fleeing ape-man gave a view of the region outside. Fletcher, after a frenzied attempt to rally his strange cohorts, swung about and dashed toward the box. The inmates could hear him tugging at the obstacle against the door.

"Madeline—Madeline!" he shouted in the shrill voice of a man gone mad. "Come out—I can save you—the Refuge——"

Then a groan of horror, as though he had realized his doom. Kent stared through the port to where a colossal body loomed from the shadows, followed by other sinister forms, each one advancing with great, awkward leaps which set the ground to shaking as from a heavy earthquake. Down from the huge body of the foremost creature swept an awful, loathsome head, from which two horrible yellow slits blazed forth into the gloom. All but paralyzed, Kent covered his eyes as Fletcher's screams split the air. And when he took his hands away, his heart leapt into his throat, for Madeline had unfastened the door, and was out in the open trying to call Fletcher into the box, for in spite of all he had done, she could not stand idly by and see him devoured by the Vangæ. But Fletcher was fleeing from the doom that menaced him, and did not hear her calls.

Stung into instant action, Kent sprang from the box to her assistance as he saw the wretched Fletcher struck by two mighty fangs and drawn into that fearsome maw. His last hope died as a second Vangæ launched itself directly toward them. It struck a few yards away in its final leap at Madeline, as Kent emptied his pistol at the monster, and the ponderous head drew back for its attack. In that brief second, a tremendous crackling rent the air, a thunderous roar followed by a jolting, dizzy swaying of the ground beneath the box. Madeline had reached the box, and she seized Kent's arm and helped him in as with one sickening lurch the parachute craft plunged downward.

Kent quickly closed the door, and bolted it; then, after a dazed interval that seemed a year, he reached for the release cords of the parachutes. With a jerk he let up two of the corner parachutes, the silken packs opening with a loud crack in the darkness above. As the box tilted awkwardly he knew that they had held. The other corner supports opened quickly, and finally the main parachute, the latter with a jolt which threatened to tear the box to pieces. The swift sinking sensation died out, replaced by a smooth, pendulumlike motion. Kent hastily spun the oxygen valve to its extreme opening, then closed it part way as the atmosphere cleared.

"We are in the hands of God," said Faire, solemnly. "If only He will save my little girl, and you, Kent, I shall be satisfied. I wonder where we shall fall."

"We'll all be saved," Kent told him, with renewed assurance. "After what we just went through we're going to make it, I know."

A little later he began to wonder if he had not spoken too soon. Despite the released oxygen the air became difficult to breathe, and he found his head throbbing with a dull pain. The cold seeped into the box as though it had been of paper, and at the thought of the long minutes before they would reach the earth his fear of their being frozen increased. The three huddled together, trying to conserve the warmth that waned from their bodies.

"Can't we punch out this port?" gasped Faire. "I'm suffocating, Kent."

"It would kill us to open it now," returned the flyer thickly. "There is nothing to breathe at this height, and the outside is much colder."

"It can't be much colder," said Madeline, weakly. "How long will it be now, do you think?"

"Less than an hour," Kent told her. "We're dropping pretty fast. When we get closer everything will be all right."

An eternity seemed to pass while they descended on down through the pitchy void. Suddenly Madeline slumped down into Kent's arms. He called her name hurriedly, but there was no answer. His lungs began to ache and a great weight seemed to press upon his heart. In a minute Faire leaned toward him.

"I'm slipping, Kent," he whispered feebly. "I can't hold out any longer——"

The words died into an unintelligible mutter. The flyer felt his senses reel. His tongue hung from his mouth as he labored to draw in the life-sustaining oxygen. With a final conscious effort he raised his cold-numbed hands and drove the glass port from its frame. There was an inrush of air, bitter cold, which seared its way into his throat and nostrils . . .

Peering ahead into the night, the engineer of the westbound Broadway Limited swore with amazement and, closing the throttle, hastily applied the airbrakes. As the speeding train squealed to a stop he leaped from the cab and raced back along the right-of-way. The wondering fireman followed close at his heels.

"What is it, Jerry?" demanded the latter, as the engineer halted near an odd-looking box, half covered by a spread of green-spotted silk.

"Hanged if I know!" cried the other, lifting the silk to gaze underneath. "The blamed thing came out of the sky, and the headlight caught it for a second. Damned if it didn't come near falling on the track."

They had been joined by the rest of the train crew and several passengers by this time. As a groan sounded within the box the silken parachutes were quickly torn aside and the

(Continued on page 143)

FETTERED

A SERIAL NOVEL by Greye La Spina

"Gretel Armitage had loosened her abundance of flaxen hair so that it hung like a misty cloud about the young artist, whose head lay on her knees."

CHAPTER 1.

BARRED WINDOWS

IT HAD been a glorious day, and a glorious trip. Bessie Gillespie, dipping paddle into her side of the well-loaded canoe, sighed such a sigh of repletion and contentment that her twin brother chuckled softly behind her.

"Think you're going to like it, Bess?" he inquired, his gray eyes darting this way and that, as the canoe made upstream slowly.

"Oh, Ewan, it's wonderful!" she breathed, tossing back her bobbed brown head to inhale the sweet fragrance of the summer woods.

"You're dead right, it's wonderful," the young man agreed. "I ought to make some ripsnorting canvases in this kind of primeval atmosphere. Jove, Bessie, but the virgin forest is magnificent!"

The girl drew in her breath contentedly, but her paddle hesitated a moment over the sluggishly moving stream that flowed darkly past the sides of the canoe in the shadow of the trees, letting sparkling drops flash in the occasional beams of light from the setting sun, as it shone here and there through thickly interlaced branches.

"The woods are getting thicker, aren't they? Do you think we'll be able to find the cabin before dark?" she asked, a bit nervously, as her hazel eyes turned from one darkling shore to the other. "It would be rather—oh, do you know, I'd somehow hate to be out here in the open after dark," she admitted, laughing just a bit shamefacedly.

Ewan's indulgent smile patronized all weak women, as he pushed his paddle briskly into the black waters and sent the canoe spinning ahead under fresh impetus.

"Right you are, Bessie. I can't say I'd enjoy it myself, exactly. It would be different if we had come prepared for out-of-door camping. But they told us at Amity Dam that we would reach the cabin before nightfall."

"Ewan! Look!"

Bessie had turned her brown head sharply to the left, and now raised her paddle, pointing it at a dark building that stood half-hidden among the thick trees, although at nearer approach a wide clearing was visible between it and the stream.

"By Jove, Bessie, that must be Dr. Armitage's place, that the natives told us about!" Ewan held his paddle in the water until the canoe swerved shoreward, then with a dexterous movement sent it swiftly to the bank. "No matter how exclusive the man feels, he can't refuse to set us on our way. I'd like to know, at least, how much farther we've got to travel tonight before we reach our own place."

"It ought to be very near here," Bessie contributed, holding the canoe steady with her paddle against the gravelly bottom of the stream.

"We'll ask. Surely this strange recluse can not refuse to give a civil answer to a civil question."

Ewan sprang out and helped his sister to the shore, drawing the canoe safely up on the strand. Together brother and sister walked toward the building that loomed gloomily out of the fast-thickening dusk.

It was a sizable affair, built of rustic hewn logs, yet with a certain pretension that marked it as the property of a more or less well-to-do man. There was a garage, also of rustic logs, behind the house, although the roadway must have been so primitive as to be hard on tires and body paint. What particularly interested the Gillespies, as they approached closely enough to see the building more distinctly, was the fact that every window, upstairs and down, was protected with iron grating, like a prison or madhouse. The effect on the spirits was somehow not an agreeable one; the inference he drew from those iron bars made even Ewan shudder, and Bessie's smooth brow contracted uneasily.

"Ewan! I'm afraid!" All at once she caught at her brother's khaki sleeve, her hazel eyes wide as she stared ahead. "I—I'm sure I saw somebody peering from behind that white curtain upstairs in the room to the right."

"Jove, Bess, don't be a goose! What if someone is looking at us? That doesn't mean anything, sis. They would, naturally, you know."

"Oh, it isn't just that. It's—it's *something*——. Ewan, let's go back to the canoe. We—we can find our own way, dear, without asking here. You know—down in the hamlet they said Dr. Armitage was—queer—and his wife—maybe not quite—right."

"Bessie, get hold of yourself. The dusk and the loneliness are taking toll of your nerves," said her brother bruskly. "I'm going to have a look at these odd Armitages. From what the villagers told us, they will be fairly near neighbors, and it's just as well to get on good terms with them in the beginning. Come along, little silly."

EWAN strode up the steps into the wide rustic veranda that seemed to run entirely around the lodge, approached the great oaken door, and with the huge knocker of weathered brass he rapped imperatively.

Silence. Bessie, close behind him, timid hand in his coat pocket, whispered timorously. "Ewan, I can feel eyes on us."

The artist tossed his rumpled brown head impatiently.

"Jove, Bessie, you're enough to give nerves to a phlegmatic cow! Out in this wilderness people don't open their doors readily to complete strangers. Why——"

He stopped abruptly, for at that moment footsteps sounded within the lodge, the scraping sound came as of heavy bars being moved inside the door, and a moment later the door itself swung slowly open.

Bessie shrank behind her brother, wide hazel eyes on that gradually widening aperture, and a terrified expectancy of she knew not what to emerge from the darkness. Into the doorway stepped a man; erect, robust, dark-haired and dark-eyed; clothed in more or less sophisticated tweeds that proclaimed their made-to-order origin. Right hand cupping a well-shaped Vandyke beard, this man glowered with heavy gaze upon brother and sister, without speaking.

Ewan felt suddenly foolish and small-boyish. He was furiously angry at himself for this susceptibility, as well as at this strange man who had power to impress him so deeply. He tried to be easy and confident in his speech, but spoke stumblingly.

"We are—ah—strangers—about here," he began.

The dark eyes burned upon him and then turned with no movement of the man's head to rest steadily on Bessie's palpably frightened face. A slight softening came into that dark, heavy scrutiny.

"It is plain that you are strangers, or you would not be intruding here," said the man clearly and distinctly. "Tell me your needs and be on your way," ungraciously. "This section is not safe after sundown," he added, in the manner of one who unwillingly gives an explanation.

Bessie shrank behind her brother and twitched at his coat. Ewan jerked away from her in irritation.

"There's no sense in being rude, Dr. Armitage," said he, then, getting hold of himself in his resentment at the other man's inhospitable attitude: "My sister and I are looking for a small log cabin which must be somewhere near by. I thought you could direct us. It is getting night, and——"

There was a soft movement behind the man in the doorway, and the susurrus of a woman's garments caught Bessie's ear. Staring beyond him, she glimpsed the dimly outlined form of another human being in the dim interior of the room. A woman! But—— A sudden shiver went over her as she strained to see more clearly. It seemed as if the face of that woman were shimmering with phosphorescence in the darkness; and the eyes were glowing redly as if lighted from within by some fearful evil force. Was it the last light of the sinking sun, reflected from the glowing sky, that caused this—illusion?

"Ewan! We don't want to trouble Dr. Armitage," gasped the girl, all at once trembling sickly with a fear of she knew not what. "Let us go on. A night in the open——"

The doctor's rich voice interrupted her. His burning dark eyes were on her pale, frightened face with a kind of lofty pity.

"You will not have to spend a night in the open," said he, rather more gently. "The cabin you are looking for is about a quarter of a mile farther upstream. On the other side of the brook, thank God!" he added strangely.

Ewan turned on his heel without further ado, drawing his sister after him.

"We could have found it without troubling our agreeable neighbor," he jerked out, angrily. "I'm sorry we landed, to meet such boorishness."

"How long do you intend to stay out here?" suddenly demanded the

doctor, advancing beyond his threshold as he spoke.

Behind him came again that suggestive rustling, as of autumn dry leaves, stirred by some creeping thing.

"As long as I find good subjects for my brush," snapped Ewan.

The doctor had followed brother and sister as they went down the rough log steps. His left hand went to his heart rigidly, and with clenched right fist he smote the wooden railing such a blow that the impact must have bruised his hand, which he now turned, opened, bent his gaze upon as if half dazed by the pain.

"Ewan, let us hurry!" begged Bessie in a tremulous, low whisper. "I am terribly frightened. He—he must be out of his mind."

"Right you are, Bess," her brother agreed. "Evidently the Amity Dam people got the thing mixed up; it isn't the wife who's insane, but the husband. Fine neighbors they'll be," he added truculently, as he reached the canoe and held it for Bessie to enter.

There was the sound of voices; low, restrained, but coming clearly to the ears of the two voyagers as they pushed off from the shore. One was a woman's voice; light, lilting, but pulsing with an undertone of significance that came ominously to Bessie, who could not help listening.

"Let me go, Dale! I—I mean to speak to our new neighbors," pleaded the feminine voice wheedlingly. "It is not nice that you should give them such a poor opinion of you. After all, we'll be neighbors."

The doctor's voice, heavy also with dark meaning, pounded against the girl's ear-drums, setting her to shuddering involuntarily, so terribly did the hidden import of his words affect her.

"Go inside, Gretel. At once! You know why you must. . . Night has fallen; the sun set but just now. Inside, I tell you!"

The woman's voice, raised, resentful, yet shrilly sweet: "Yes—it is sunset—and they have gone—and I so wanted——"

"Yes, I think I understand, but I am here to take care of just that. Their cabin, Gretel, is on the other side of the stream," said the man's baritone heavily, "for which I render thanks to your Maker."

"The water—keeps running—so fast! It draws a line between us and them," wailed the woman's voice, plaintively.

"Thank God for that, Gretel, if you can. If not tonight, you may, tomorrow," said the doctor's voice fervently. "And now, come in, I tell you," sternly. "Come, Gretel; I insist."

A woman's sobs cut sharply on the still night air. There was a scuffling sound as of a struggle. There was an outcry, smothered suddenly: "No! No, Dale, no!" Then the heavy thud of the great oaken door. Silence. Silence that palpitated with the menace of the unknown.

"Ewan, there's something terribly strange about those two!" cried Bessie, pushing her paddle agitatedly into the water. "I think they're *both* crazy."

"Nonsense, sis! It's the man who's touched. As for the woman"—he hesitated—"she has my deepest sympathy. Poor thing, all alone up here in these woods, cut off from normal social intercourse with other human beings! Whatever she is, I'm sorry for her."

The canoe glided along in the dusk between shadowy shores that crowded dark and ominous on either hand.

"I don't know whether I am going to like this or not," shivered the girl, timorous eyes roving from one side to the other. "I feel as if any minute something would jump out upon us, Ewan. Oh, what's that, ly-

ing across the water?" and she screamed and flung herself down in the canoe.

"Low bridge!" called Ewan.

He had seen it more clearly, that great log that lay across this narrower part of the stream from shore to shore, forming a crude bridge. The canoe shot under it and Ewan slowed its progress to look about him.

"Hand me that electric torch, sis. Look! There is our cabin. We're nicely in time. In a few minutes we'll be cozily inside, Bess, so cheer up, girl."

A bit back from the shore, with a cleared space about it, stood a small log cabin that to Bessie Gillespie's eyes looked very inviting in the last palely lingering daylight. With thankful heart, as if she had reached a safe refuge from some vaguely threatening evil, she helped her brother carry their belongings from canoe to cabin.

But even after he had long been asleep, comforted by the hot meal she had prepared, Bessie lay sleepless, thinking against her will of the burning eyes of that strange physician; his inhospitable attitude; his unseen wife who had so longed, in vain, to meet her new neighbors.

As for Ewan, his smoldering resentment against the doctor followed him into his dreams, for he tossed and moaned as he slept. Once he cried aloud: "Poor little thing—I'll help you!" at which his sister shuddered in the night, burdened by premonitions that weighed heavily upon her usually blithe spirit.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEWSPAPER CLIPPING

It was well after 10 o'clock one morning about two weeks later when Ewan departed to complete a painting begun several days before. Bessie was occupying herself as usual, putting the cabin in order for the day. The impression of that first evening had faded somewhat from her mind; if she thought of it momentarily now, it was only to dismiss her unreasoning terror of that night as a thing born of darkness and the chill loneliness of unknown, apparently threatening surroundings.

When she heard a masculine step outside the window to which she was busily tacking mosquito netting, she did not lift her eyes, and was correspondingly startled when a voice not her brother's addressed her.

"*Bitte, Fräulein,*" murmured a coolly ironical baritone. "*Ein Wortchen.*"

"Oh!" cried out the girl, shrinking back from the window, her thoughts flashing involuntarily to the fact that she was entirely alone in the cabin and Ewan beyond hearing.

"Please!" said Dr. Armitage, urgently. "Don't be startled. I know you are thinking that your brother couldn't hear you if you were to call him—but you won't have to call, I assure you."

Bessie looked at him, this mind-reader, out of plucky hazel eyes, but could not answer. The doctor smiled. At that frank, amused smile all fright left the girl at once, for his face immediately lost its forbidding severity and became so gentle, so appealing, so boyish, that courage flowed warmly back to her heart and brought an answering smile to her own lips.

"It's very unfortunate," argued the doctor as if to himself, and he stood a little distance from the window as if to reassure her; "it's very unfortunate that the other night you took my solicitude for sheer rudeness."

"Solicitude?" murmured Bessie, with ironical emphasis.

Resentful color flowed into her brown cheeks so that they glowed hotly.

"That is what I said, Miss ——?"

"Bessie Gillespie," she murmured unwillingly.

"From some remarks dropped the evening you called, I inferred that the amiable inhabitants of Amity Dam had told you my name and disgraceful reputation," drawled the doctor, his heavy dark eyebrows slightly lifted as if in lofty amusement.

"If you treated them the way you did my brother and myself, I don't wonder that their opinion of you isn't very good," Bessie said.

"I am quite aware, Miss Gillespie, that I did not appear to much advantage that night. Take into consideration, please, that I came out here with my—with Mrs. Armitage—in order to keep severely away from all other human beings." His voice was stern, his face grave. "And then all at once you two appeared, to tell me you would be close neighbors, and the—and it was sunset," he added abruptly.

Bessie's full lips compressed. She did not speak.

"I can see you are still angry with me, Miss Gillespie. I'm sorry. But that is as it may be." He moved one foot uneasily, tracing aimless figures on the sandy path. "I would be glad, nevertheless," said he steadily, without looking at her but watching the movements of his foot, "if you could think more kindly of your neighbor, Miss Gillespie. Believe me, my visit this morning is a reluctant one, but prompted by a motive entirely altruistic."

"All of which is undoubtedly very interesting, Dr. Armitage," the girl retorted coldly, "but I have much to do this morning, and my brother will be returning for his dinner, and——"

"And you have no time to waste on a rude, uncouth boor like Dale Armitage!" He laughed hardly. "My misfortune! From your standpoint you are entirely blameless, Miss Gillespie. Still—at the risk of seeming yet more rude and brutal, I must prosecute my errand here, for it is a high duty laid upon me not by my own conscience but by the dictates of a yet loftier duty toward not only you and your brother, but all mankind."

Bessie shrank within her window, and cast a fleeting glance toward the cabin door. Thank goodness, Ewan had closed it when he went out. If this strangely talking man made a single suspicious move, she would pull down the window, and run to throw the fastening bar against the cabin door. And then she would hunt for Ewan's police whistle. Her heart beat quickly with agitation, and yet she could not exactly persuade herself that the doctor was not kindly in his intentions, for his piercing dark eyes were bent upon her under their heavy brows with an expression that was quite gentle. Indeed, she thought it almost pitying, which was surely odder yet.

"I came here this morning to talk with you, because you are a woman. A woman's intuitions are finer than a man's. You ought to *feel* that I am in earnest when I tell you what I have come to say. For it is within your power to persuade your brother to leave this accursed spot at once, never to return," he finished solemnly.

Bessie's breath came faster. She kept her eyes upon the doctor's face, and again its expression struck her as being pitying to a degree that weighed her down strangely, yet made her sense his sincerity with acute perception.

"I want to warn you that if you and your brother remain here, you are doing so at the risk of a peril to yourselves of so frightful a nature that it would be impossible for me to lay sufficient stress upon its horror. Miss Gillespie, this locality is not healthful for a handsome young man.

Nor for a charming young woman," he bowed gravely.

Again Bessie sensed intuitively his honesty of intention, and could not take offense at the implied compliment.

"So far I have seen nothing to endanger either my brother's health or my own," she argued.

"It is not to be expected that you could, so soon," replied he. "If you knew what threatened you, it would already be too late," sadly. "Oh, my dear young lady, believe me that I am very much in earnest when I beg, implore you, to leave this place; if possible, today. You do not know, you could not even dream in your wildest flights of imagination, what danger lies in wait for you if you remain. Urge your brother to leave here this very afternoon. The trip downstream to Amity Dam would not take you as long as coming upstream; you would get there before dusk, and be among human beings——"

"Dr. Armitage," interrupted the girl. "Tell me something. Is Mrs. Armitage—insane? I—I thought she was, that night. She—looked so queer."

"So you saw her?" said he, slowly, appearing strangely moved at this direct inquiry. He flung back his head, beating the palms of his hands together in a hasty, unstudied gesture of desperation. Then he turned burning eyes upon the girl.

"Would — her insanity — distress you to the point of leaving here?" he evaded cautiously.

She shook her head slowly.

"No. But I'd like to know."

"My child, she is not *insane*. I wish to God it were that!"

Bessie's startled, incredulous expression made him add, hastily:

"If that were all, it would be nothing. Comparatively nothing. And preferable, God knows, to what she is."

"Then she isn't insane?" persisted the girl.

"Far, far worse," replied the doctor cryptically, sadly.

"But if she isn't insane, why must you shield all your windows with iron bars?" she demanded.

"Ah, the reason for that you would not believe, even if I were to tell you," sighed he, heavily. "Miss Gillespie, Mrs. Armitage herself agreed to those bars at the windows."

"Then it *is* something from without that you fear!" cried the girl triumphantly. "Well, I am not afraid of anything while my brother is here to protect me. I know there are bears and sometimes wildcats in these woods. I don't go far from the cabin, and Ewan is usually within call," she lied steadily. "And I don't intend to take him away from his painting. He shall not be cheated out of this summer's work," defiantly.

"Then you will not heed my warning, you foolish girl?" exclaimed the doctor, with angry impatience kindling in his eyes.

"It is unnecessary to address me in that impertinent way, Dr. Armitage," the girl reminded him with proud resentment. "I am not a baby. I am twenty-four years old. I see no reason why you should not treat me with respect."

Her caller sighed heavily, impatiently. He took the Vandyke beard in his right hand with characteristic gesture and stood gazing upon her—sorrowfully, she told herself in astonishment.

"Very well, young lady. Since you refuse to save yourself by discreet flight, perhaps you will listen to another warning of a yet more personal and pointed nature, Miss Gillespie," with emphasis upon her name, mockingly.

"I would prefer you to leave me alone!" snapped the girl, losing patience. "I have no time to dilly-dally, Dr. Armitage."

"Listen!" came the doctor's rich voice. He strode to the window where she stood, too startled to retreat into the room. "Under no circumstances invite my—Mrs. Armitage—across your threshold! Do you understand? *You are not to ask her into your home.* Is that sufficiently clear?" He thrust his gloomy face at her, his black eyes snapping dangerously.

"It is clear that you are not only a brute, but idiotically jealous into the bargain," Bessie declared, struggling to maintain an outward composure she was far from feeling.

"Good God!" ejaculated the doctor tensely, raising his face to the noon-day sky as if in desperation. "No wonder hell's inferno can be established easily on earth, when human beings are so suspicious, so harsh in their judgments, so mistaken in their hasty opinions!"

He turned again to the girl.

"Very well, then, stay!" he grated. "But you remain in these woods at your peril. Not only of body, little fool, but of soul," he finished sternly.

His sincerity was obvious. Bessie began trembling. She took hold of the window ledge to steady herself. He must be sincere, to dare speak to her in such a way. ("Little fool!" he had said.)

"I believe you are trying to tell me something, but I can't quite understand," she murmured, moistening suddenly dry lips. "I wish—I wish you could trust me enough to be frank, Dr. Armitage."

Such a melting look altered the severe, almost grim visage of the doctor, that Bessie Gillespie felt the choking of powerful emotion in her throat as if in answer to the feeling she knew must be moving her visitor's heart.

"Child," said the doctor very softly, "if I could tell you, I would. But this is a thing that no average human being can credit and remain sane. Unless—unless there is a more than human courage in that soul, a more than ordinary poise, a serenity, strong faith in a higher power. If I could only believe that you might trust me," he said gently, appealingly, "it would be a most beautiful thought to take into my heart, to comfort me in my black hours. If you could only believe me sane, poised, braced to do a duty toward mankind that will take the utmost courage, the utmost strength, of which I am capable—God, how it would help me!"

His dark eyes held hers. She could see his mouth working as he strove to control himself. Sympathy, pity for something she sensed in him but could not put into coherent thought, swept over her. She slipped one brown hand under the unfastened mosquito netting to meet his. The man without leaned over in courtly fashion. At the touch of his reverent lips Bessie Gillespie thrilled; her eyelids drooped; her breath came quicker.

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Miss Gillespie, for your expression of confidence. If it is God's will, the truth will in time be made clear to you, but believe me when I say that I hope you will never have to hear it! That is the kindest thing I can wish you. God keep you safe, nut-brown maid!"

He turned away and walked with great strides that carried him rapidly to the roughly hewn log that formed communication with his side of the stream. Just there he stopped, leaned down, and picked up a newspaper which must have been dropped by Ewan the preceding evening, when he returned from a trip downstream to Amity Dam. This he opened with a quick, nervous movement and began scanning it avidly. All at once he crumpled it, flinging it from him with a gesture of horror. He stood as if frozen to the spot, staring at it for several terrible seconds. Then he went reluctantly over, picked it up

once more, smoothed it out, and began to read again.

Bessie Gillespie was not by nature any more curious than others of her sex, but these incomprehensible actions almost made her doubt the wisdom of her expression of confidence in that strange and mysterious man. She drew away from the window, but not so far back that she could not watch his further actions.

Dr. Armitage tore out a corner of the paper, thrust it into the pocket of his tweed jacket, and went across the log bridge with steady stride. The girl's eyes followed him curiously. All at once she saw his clenched right hand strike the left palm; his dark head go back with a startled air. Her eyes went beyond him.

Ewan was walking slowly from the woods on the opposite shore, and beside him her lithe figure swaying with alluring grace, moved the slight form of a woman dressed in a pale green sports suit banded in white. The color set off her marvelous blond beauty delightfully. Such flaxen hair as showed in escaping tendrils Bessie had not often seen, and she felt, rather than saw, that the eyes under the brim of the soft felt hat that this woman wore pulled down over her forehead would be the clear blue of an April sky.

It was this unexpected sight that had caused Dr. Armitage's furious gesture, and he now quickened his step to approach the strollers the sooner. Ewan's attention was diverted from his engrossing and fair companion by the hurrying footsteps, and he turned his head to see the doctor advancing rapidly in his direction. Mrs. Armitage lifted her face, smiling, to Ewan, and then turned to her husband with a bored, indifferent air, as he went directly up to her, pulled the newspaper clipping from his pocket, and thrust it under her very eyes with the air of a man who has reached the final limit of patience.

His furious air must have inflamed Ewan, who struck at that hand, so that the clipping fluttered to the ground. Bessie could hear the voices plainly as she listened, hidden in her window.

"A gentleman treats even his wife with some respect in the presence of strangers," Ewan was saying icily, in a tone that his sister recognized with apprehension as one presaging an impending outburst of passion on his part.

The doctor paid no attention to the young artist, but addressed himself entirely to Mrs. Armitage, with the air of one who could afford to slight lesser matters in the presence of those of more importance.

"Do you realize what you have done, you fiend?" he demanded, in a voice that was almost a shout. "After all your promises? Do you know what this entails upon me now?"

Mrs. Armitage shrugged delicate shoulders with an assumption of long-suffering patience. Her eyes were not on her husband when she finally deigned to address him, but on the artist.

"My dear Dale," she said clearly, "you are beside yourself. Please control your temper. There is a third person present."

The doctor almost choked. He swallowed convulsively, hot color dyeing his cheeks darker than ever. His burning eyes flashed hotly.

"How dared you disobey me?" he said at last, finding his voice thickly. "I told you not to leave the lodge. I forbade you to make the acquaintance of these innocent people!"

"Don't shout like that!" snapped the artist, thrusting himself between the doctor and Mrs. Armitage. "That's no way to address a woman. Control yourself!"

For a moment it seemed as if the doctor would strike him, for he lifted one clenched fist and it remained for a flashing instant level with his

shoulder; then went down, open. The hand seized upon the wrist of Mrs. Armitage, whom her husband jerked with almost brutal abruptness toward the lodge road.

Ewan ground out something between his teeth. He started after them.

Mrs. Armitage turned her oval, charming face around cautiously. She looked into Ewan's enraged eyes for a moment, then shook her head with a quick little movement of negation. But her blue eyes were quite pitiful.

"Are you coming, Gretel?" growled the doctor, pulling her toward him. "Don't presume too much on my indulgence!"

She cast a languishing and martyred smile toward Ewan.

"Yes—I am coming. Dale—you hurt me," she complained.

"Not as much as you have hurt others," replied the doctor sharply.

Ewan remained as if rooted to the spot, his eyes fixed on the retreating forms until they disappeared down the bank among the trees. Then he went back across the stream, and flung himself into a chair in the cabin, face moody, mouth grim.

"You must be careful, Ewan," his sister warned. "Don't forget that Mrs. Armitage is—is queer," she hesitated. "She may even be dangerous at times."

"Dangerous?" snorted Ewan scornfully. "That little delicate thing? Don't be a goose, Bessie. She couldn't hurt a fly, poor child. And she's all alone, in the power of that jealous brute! It's abominable!"

"Well, what can we do about it, Ewan? He's her husband."

"Poor little thing, she apologized to me so prettily for the beastly way her great brute of a husband acted the other night. She felt so keenly his total lack of common decency toward us. She told me he is frightfully jealous of her. He brought her out here so that he could have her entirely to himself. He was just furious, that first night, at the idea of anyone living in this cabin, so near her; man or woman," disgustedly.

Bessie got out a chopping bowl and knife absently, her mind busy with the conflicting ideas she and Ewan now entertained for their two mysterious neighbors. Ewan rambled on; occupied with his sympathy for Gretel Armitage and his resentment at the doctor's obviously brutal attitude toward such a frail young creature.

Of one thing Bessie was convinced: the doctor was a sincere man carrying some secret burden that at times almost overwhelmed him. That it had to do with his wife, she understood. He had called Gretel a fiend. He would not so far have forgotten himself, had not the provocation been a serious one.

All at once: "Ewan," said Bessie sharply, "go across the bridge and bring me that scrap of paper Dr. Armitage tore from yesterday's newspaper, will you?"

CHAPTER 3

THE KEY TO THE LODGE

EWAN brought Bessie the clipping dropped by the doctor, but neither brother nor sister could make anything of it. It was a short notice of a funeral, to take place that afternoon, of a child of seven which had died of pernicious anemia. What connection could there be between this child of another name, and the Armitages? Yet the doctor had blamed his wife for something connected with that news item, had spoken of a duty imposed upon him because of it.

In a vain endeavor to account for his words, his anger, his seeming brutality, Bessie had turned that clipping upside down, around and around, but all her curiosity brought her was part of an advertisement for facial cream

on the reverse of the notice, and a bit of political speech carried over from another page of the newspaper. It was a hopeless puzzle. She could not reconcile it with Dr. Armitage's pleading that she believe him a sane man burdened with something that would test the sanity of a less well-poised mentality. Yet in spite of herself, whenever she thought of his smile and the quivering of his mobile lips as he tried to thank her for her intuitive expression of trust, she could not but feel him well worthy her confidence.

Ewan, with sketching block and colors, left the cabin about 1 o'clock. He wanted to catch the glinting afternoon sun on some birches he had found in a lovely group on the bank of the stream a little farther up.

"If that crazy fool comes blundering around again, Bessie, have the goodness to close the door against him. I left my police whistle on my dresser; blow it, and I'll be here on the double-quick. He's a big chap, but he'd better not bother my twin sister," threatened Ewan, grimly ominous.

"I don't think he will come again, Ewan," the girl opined, but she knew in her heart that her words were insincere.

As promptly as if he had been on the watch for her brother's departure, the robust form of Dr. Armitage came over the log bridge a few minutes later. The sight of him set Bessie to trembling, for in spite of an innate confidence in his sincerity, her remembrance of his almost brutal treatment of his wife troubled her and made her nervous. She wished he had not come back. And why should he come, she asked herself?

He walked briskly across the clearing, directly to the window where he had talked with her before.

"Miss Gillespie!" came his low, guarded voice. "Will you do me a great favor, please? I want to leave a key with you, in case of any emergency down at the lodge."

Bessie crossed the room and went to the door, opening it wide as if to reassure herself of her confidence in her intuitions. At this action, the doctor turned from the window. He did not approach her, yet his smile, bent on her with warm significance, bathed the girl in a glow of approbation that somehow made her feel strangely happy.

"You are not entirely disgusted with the brute that I seem to appear?" asked Dr. Armitage, almost sadly.

"I don't understand how you can act that way to Mrs. Armitage," the girl said abruptly. "What can she have done?"

"That is just what I can not tell you, you see," responded the doctor, his face grave. "It was something for which she was not, in a finer sense, responsible, and on the other hand, she was entirely at fault. It was a terrible thing, Miss Gillespie; so terrible that for the moment, when I realized the extent of the horror, I was too overcome by my emotion to treat her as a man should always treat any woman," he deprecated.

Bessie cogitated for a moment.

"My brother brought me the newspaper clipping that you tore out of that journal," she said slowly.

"You read it, then? Ah, but you do not know what it meant to me! It meant that I can no longer trust my —Mrs. Armitage's—word. I—I was foolish, unwise enough, to trust her. The result is—— God, out of Your infinite mercy, help me to undo what she has done!" he cried out passionately, clenched fists raised shaking to the sky.

"Still I do not understand," persisted the girl.

Her hazel eyes were on the doctor's convulsed face, pity in their tender depths. He drew a long, deep breath, let his hands drop at his sides,

and looked almost hungrily into that gentle, compassionate countenance.

"I wonder if in your heart you have the slightest idea of what your sympathy means to me in the fight I am waging?" he asked simply. "Until now, there has not been a human being in whom I could even confide sufficiently to ask them to trust me," complained he, with a contraction of his heavy brows as if in mental pain.

He had come by slow steps to stand before her as she hesitated in the doorway. Now she put out her hands all at once, pity in her eyes, that rested on his face with gentle feminine solicitude.

"You asked if I would do you a favor," she reminded him, not at once withdrawing her hands, which he had taken in his with the incredulous air of a man who beholds the unfolding of a miracle.

He let her fingers slip from his reluctantly, dived into his pocket, and brought out a key which he extended with hesitation.

"It is the key to the only usable door at the lodge," he explained. "The other is screwed into its place."

"Then your wife has gone?" asked Bessie.

"Mrs. Armitage is at the lodge," replied he unwillingly.

Bessie looked at the key, then up at him; puzzled.

"Why do you bring me the key, when Mrs. Armitage is there?" she asked, slightly troubled.

"Because," replied he steadily, "Mrs. Armitage is locked into the lodge, and the windows have been purposely barred to prevent her from emerging."

At the girl's persistent gaze, asking questions that she could not well put into words, he went on: "Mrs. Armitage herself has agreed to being locked in. But she is afraid that a fire or a severe storm might create a situation, where she——"

"Oh, I see," hurriedly interpolated the girl. "You will be away over night, and she wishes someone to have the key, so that she can be—can be let out—in case of an emergency?"

"I shall be away until tomorrow night," the doctor told her. "I have a sad and terrible errand to do; a fearful but imperative duty to perform, God helping me. I hope to return for the key tomorrow evening, Miss Gillespie, and I shall be grateful if you will keep an eye on the lodge when you can."

"Of course," agreed the girl impulsively. "Ought I"—she hesitated—"ought I to run over and call on Mrs. Armitage, so that she won't be lonesome while you're away?"

He turned his dark eyes on her, something like horror gathering in them until they shone darkly like mysterious forest pools. His face froze into a tragic mask of terrible significance.

"Under no circumstances must you cross that threshold, or ask her to cross yours," he said strainedly, his voice stern.

Bessie's astonished face, turned to his in incredulous amazement at such a warning to one of his wife's sex, prompted him to more explicit speech. His expression grew lighter as his somber eyes rested on the girl's gentle, ingenuous countenance.

"You are ignorant of what she is. If ever she accepted your hospitality, you would rue it to your dying day. And after," he added, darkly; "*and after.*"

Bessie smiled. (When she thought—afterward—that she had *smiled,* sick shudders raced each other up and down her spinal column.)

The doctor laid the key in her hand.

"One more thing, Miss Gillespie. Please do not, unless there should happen to be a fire at the lodge, give this key to your brother."

She looked at him thoughtfully,

consideringly. A smile, half wistful, came over his face.

"I hope you are not thinking me jealous," he said. "I'm not. No matter what you may think, I'm not jealous of—Gretel Armitage. If—if she were not what she is—I would let her divorce me and seek her happiness elsewhere, but—as matters stand—it is better for her and for the world," he breathed mysteriously, "that she remain Mrs. Armitage," with an intonation of irony. "You will keep this key yourself? You promise?"

Bessie nodded affirmatively.

"I thank you. You can not know how much your kindness means to me. In case of an emergency—give your brother the key," said the doctor, all at once becoming hard of voice and manner.

"Why should not I——?" began the girl, when he stopped her.

"Because I do not wish to have you exposed to an infection that is so utterly horrible that you could not understand it—or believe—even if I were to tell you of its danger," said he, sternly.

"Yet you would expose my brother!" charged the girl, hotly.

"Because he is a man, and because a man must always risk something where a woman is concerned. Also—but I can not tell you now. How chained I am! How hopelessly fettered! Later, when I return, I may tell you something of this plague that heaven has seen fit to release upon the world, and that I—I, only I—am in a position to check. Bound by duty!"

He turned abruptly and went over the clearing again, across the log bridge, his bearing royal. Bessie Gillespie put one hand over her heart to check its beating. She found herself pressing to her warm brown cheek the key with which this strange man had entrusted her, and began to sob softly in terror at her own emotions and the consequences they might bring in their train.

There was something strangely sweet in his confidence, yet the surety weighed down Bessie's spirits that somehow she and this man were not to remain strangers; that their lives were subtly interlaced by the inscrutable decrees of fate.

CHAPTER 4

THE COMING OF GRETEL

EWAN brought in a half-dozen extra armfuls of wood for the cook-stove, while Bessie was getting supper that night.

"It's going to storm hard," he told her, dumping an armful of split wood on the floor by the stove. "The wind is rising every minute, and the sky gets blacker and blacker. There ought to be a full moon tonight, but there's no hope of it with these clouds. Nice to be cozy in here!"

Bessie, feeling under more than ordinary tension, walked to the door and looked out, for the dozenth time. The burden of the charge laid upon her by the absent doctor wore heavily on her mind. She feared a storm. What if lightning struck the lodge? She would have to give Ewan the key, and he would release the blond Gretel and bring her to the cabin. The doctor had expressly forbidden this, for some inscrutable reason of his own, which she felt, nevertheless, must be a good one, such was the confidence that mysterious man had aroused in her.

"You won't go out and leave me alone, Ewan?" she begged her brother nervously.

The artist looked at her curiously, as he straightened up from depositing another armful of wood on the floor.

"Not getting nerves, Bessie, are you? I never knew you to be as fussy as you've been since we got here. If you keep it up, I can't stand it; we'll have to go back," he growled, half in earnest, half in jest.

Bessie stood against the door-frame,

staring out at the darkening sky. There had been a gorgeous sunset, presaging fair weather, yet fast upon it had been the rising gale, the fast-scudding black clouds, and now the ever-increasing murmur of the on-rushing storm that swung and swayed the branches of the near-by trees until it seemed in the dusk that they were stretching out giant hands to seize any blundering intruders and wreak vengeance upon them. The girl shrank back inside the doorway as an especially severe gust of wind caught at her apron, whisking it away from khaki outing knickers with unrespectful fingers. It caught, too, at the door, slamming it back against the cabin wall.

"Jove, Bess! Dead right, it's going to be a heavy storm. No, sis, I shan't leave you. Nobody could tease me out into such a tempest."

Ewan flung down another armful of wood.

"We'd better close up windows and bar the door. Ewan, if—if lightning struck the lodge—would you—would you feel you had to help—*them?*"

Ewan secured the shaking door with the wooden bar against the increasing tempest.

"Why should I, when her husband's there?" he growled. "We've no call to butt in. Unless," and his sturdy young body stiffened involuntarily, "unless that poor girl were alone, and we knew it."

"You'd go, then?"

"Naturally, Bess."

"Suppose — s u p p o s e she is — alone?" faltered Bess, her fingers going into her apron pocket, where it seemed to her that the lodge key was actually burning.

"If I thought Gretel Armitage were alone," responded Ewan sharply, "I wouldn't wait for the lodge to be struck by lightning, sis. Fancy that poor girl, in that jail of a place, with this thunder crashing and the lightning flashing, and all hell breaking loose! Like——"

Bessie screamed; loudly, shrilly. A crash of thunder shook the little cabin with its detonations, coming simultaneously with a long, vivid flash of yellow lightning that paled into nothingness the dim light of the oil-lamp on the table. It was as if Ewan had conjured up that terrible response to his imaginings.

Before she could recover from the shock, Bessie found herself looking into her brother's almost frantic eyes, his hands imprisoning her wrists tightly. His voice was shouting furiously into her terrified ears, above the roaring and crashing of the storm. Never before had she seen him in such a condition of passion as he exhibited at that moment. To complete her discomfiture, the skies seemed to open, and the pouring torrents that descended in white sheets beat upon the roof and battered at the walls of the little cabin, until it seemed that only such shouts could have been heard; as if a shout could be the only normal mode of communication in that bedlam of maddened nature.

"Bessie, that madman's been here again! Don't deny it! You've been talking with him! Is she—is Mrs. Armitage—alone down there? Has he gone away and left her all alone, in that hideous loneliness? Answer me!"

"Ewan! You're hurting me!" she cried back, trying to twist her aching wrists from his frenzied grasp. "Let go my hands! If I talked with him, it was my own affair. Let me go!"

She writhed away from him, crying out again in affright as another terrific crash of thunder with its accompanying burst of blinding brilliancy thundered down the forest ways, shaking the cabin until it seemed that it would be moved from its foundations.

"He told you he'd be away? Is she alone there? Oh, Bessie, don't be

so stupid, for God's sake! Think of that poor thing, all alone in this frightful storm! It's inhuman!"

Bessie jerked her hands from Ewan's grasp at last. She twitched away from him. As she moved, he caught at her apron, and the thin strings loosened at his pull. The apron slipped away. From the pocket slid the key, falling upon the floor with a metallic jingle that Bessie's oversensitive ears heard even above the roaring of the tempest.

Ewan saw it fall. He sprang forward; had it in his fingers in a moment; turned it over and over. Then his eyes sought his sister's, accusing, scornful.

"This key doesn't belong here, Bessie. It's the key to the lodge, isn't it? So this is the reason why you don't want me to go out into the storm and leave you! A woman's heart! Can a man ever understand why a sister should be jealous of another woman?" Then he stopped and for a moment stood alert. "Listen to that wind!"

To Bessie it seemed a mad howl of malignant triumph that came down the forest ways as Ewan seized upon the lodge key. She sprang to his side.

"Ewan! He left it with me in case of an emergency," she began.

"Well, what d'you call this?" inquired Ewan as he tore down his oilcloth slicker and buckled a rain-hat over his dark hair. "Tea party?" sarcastically.

"You're not going out in this frightful storm?"

"Jove, Bessie, what's gotten into you? If you were normal you'd realize there's nothing else for me to do. Be human, my dear girl. There's another girl, all alone if I'm to believe what you've let me infer, in a great jail of a house, probably frightened into spasms by this storm," sternly, "and you try to persuade me to leave her there alone."

"Don't go, Ewan!"

Almost beside herself, Bessie stood in her brother's path and laid appealing hands on his shoulders.

"I'm afraid, Ewan! Why should you leave me here alone, when I'm so frightened, and go off to comfort a stranger? Ewan!"

Ewan shook off her hands disgustedly.

"Buck up, Bessie. If I'd dreamed that you'd be acting like this, I'd have come out here alone," he told her scornfully. "Better put on some coffee and get out some of your extra clothes, for we may be drenched when we get back," he finished prosaically.

The sister stood straight, regarding him from wide hazel eyes. She was remembering with painful distinctness Dr. Armitage's strange warning: "Do not let her cross your threshold!"

"You don't intend to bring her here?" she protested, weakly.

"How can I stay there, when her husband's away, Bessie, and he such a confounded jealous brute? Use your head, my dear. Here she'll be with another woman."

Ewan unbarred the door. When he lifted the latch, the storm twitched it out of his hand and the door swung back as if opened by unseen spirits of the night, abroad in terrible potency, and expecting him.

"Bar it behind me, Bessie. And don't open until I get back."

EWAN was almost blown across the clearing. A vivid flash of lightning showed him on the log bridge, the electric torch in his hand dulled into insignificance under that brilliant blaze from the open heavens. Bessie pushed the door to with main strength, barred it, and then sank breathless into a chair, far more alarmed than she dared admit to herself.

Ewan had gone to bring Mrs. Armitage to the little cabin, and it was

this very thing the doctor had warned her against. "Do not ask her into the cabin. Do not invite her across your threshold," he had said. In her heart Bessie was sure that Dale Armitage had some sound reason for this warning command; that much her intuition told her. And now Ewan had taken the key, and had gone to bring Gretel Armitage into this place where her husband had distinctly said she must under no circumstances be brought.

Trembling now and then, as an especially fierce gust of wind swept the clearing, making the little cabin shake ominously as if about to take leave of its foundations, the girl finally got up and put on coffee. Then she looked over her scanty collection of sports clothes, selecting a pair of tweed knickers and a flannel shirt. Then she sat down again near the fire, actually appreciating it, even on that summer night, for the chill in the air was as sharp as it was untimely.

Such turmoil and unrest was within her as she had never experienced before. It was an expectancy of something strange, something unwelcome, that she felt coming to a head. She could not help connecting it with that glimpse she had had of Gretel Armitage on that night of arrival in the woods, from the depths of the dark room behind the doctor, when the setting sun had shone redly in Gretel's eyes, and her white face had glimmered with unhealthy pallor through the darkness. That it was the reflection of the sun Bessie had long since persuaded herself; any other thought would have been unwelcome, impossible. Yet the bare idea that Gretel Armitage was coming into the snug little cabin, Gretel with her gleaming eyes, her vivid red lips, troubled the girl excessively. She told herself in vain that it was the impression she had received from the doctor's warning; Gretel's strange, enigmatical smile recurred to her again and again; she told herself uneasily that she had no real reason to distrust Mrs. Armitage—unless it were the doctor's warning, and it would be unfair to be prejudiced to that extent.

The coffee sent up foaming bubbles of fragrance. Bessie rose and pushed it back on the stove.

Outside, the tempest still roared, but the thunder seemed to have spent its force; there were only distant rumbles now and then, and only occasional flashes of lightning. When the girl felt it must be about time for her brother to return, she pushed aside the rough burlap curtain that shielded the window giving on the clearing and the log bridge, and drew up a chair, to watch for the dancing light of his electric torch.

There came a terrific rumble, like the threatening mutter of a subdued but angry giant, and in the blazing light of the simultaneous flash Bessie saw a clumsy and misshapen creature staggering across the log bridge, leaning against the wind as it picked its way slowly. The girl was on her feet, one hand against her thumping heart, the other to the lips that writhed in vain endeavor to stifle the outcry that forced its way between them. Her face went closer to the pane as she stared.

Another flash of lightning and a low rumble.

Oh, it was Ewan! And in his arms he was carrying——! It must be the doctor's wife whom he held so tenderly. Hot indignation flamed up in Bessie's simple heart. That woman ——!

In another moment Ewan was pounding on the door.

"Bessie! Open! We're drenched! Open, Bessie!"

Bessie flew to the door and raised the bar. From without, Ewan impatiently pushed up the latch, and the door, urged by the wind, swung back, framing him with his shrink-

ing companion in the doorway against the night's pitchy darkness. In that passing moment Bessie's soul apprehended such a crowding evil as sent her forward, palms outstretched, a cry choking into silence on her lips.

Gretel Armitage, seeing no ready welcome from that unwilling hostess, took one faltering step, and then sank slowly downward as if fainting.

Ewan, flashing a furious glance at his sister, sprang to Gretel's assistance. He caught the limp form in his arms, and with the doctor's wife against his breast he crossed the cabin threshold and bore his drooping, lovely burden to a chair, where he let her down carefully.

Bessie pushed the door to, but it seemed to her that all the hideous medley of that night's terrific tumult had in some subtle wise entered the cabin with Gretel Armitage, for the wind died down; the clouds scudding across the sky began to show glimpses of light from the hitherto hidden full moon; and the final clap of thunder that had announced, as it were, the arrival of the unbidden guest, seemed to have been the final effort of the storm as it retreated behind the mountain peaks above the valley.

"Got some dry clothes for her, Bessie?" the artist asked. He was leaning over Gretel, chafing her hands solicitously, his manner anxious and disturbed. "She'll need them, I'm sure."

"You are drenched, Ewan. She isn't," retorted his sister, whose keen eyes had noted that Ewan's oilskin had been wrapped about Gretel, leaving him unprotected against the storm's onslaughts.

"Oh, I can change later," Ewan said indifferently. "Coffee smells fine. We can all do with some coffee, I guess. She's a trump, but she was about half dead with terror, all alone in that weird old place, and this frightful storm shouting and beating at her windows," he added, yearningly, as he watched the trembling of her eyelids. "Poor girl! Be gentle with her, Bessie."

Bessie's mouth drew into a straighter line than ever it had before in her life. Privately, she thought that the doctor's wife was in no need of her gentle ministrations.

"If you'll get into your own room, I'll see to her," she snapped, putting out cups and saucers.

Ewan rambled on.

"Poor little thing! Until we got to the stream, she managed to struggle along with my help, but at the bridge she simply collapsed. She couldn't have made it across that narrow log, so I picked her up and carried her. And at that, she was so weak she fainted, as you saw."

The doctor's wife moaned.

"How the water runs! So black—so swift! It blocks my way!"

She lifted her flaxen head heavily. Her blue eyes opened with sluggish languor.

"Oh, my kind knight and rescuer!"

Ewan, self-conscious color flinging signals of betrayal in his cheeks, let her hands drop.

"Feeling all right?" he asked tenderly. "I'll clear out, so my sister can get you into some dry togs."

He slipped out of sight into the small room adjoining.

Gretel watched his going from under half-lowered lids, white, blue-veined, languid. Then she lifted them alertly, almost hardly, to meet Bessie's suspicious and resentful hazel eyes. An amused, superior smile wreathed her vivid scarlet lips. She lowered the white lids then over her eyes, as if to conceal discreet amusement at her situation.

"If you want to take off your dress, Mrs. Armitage, and put on these knickers and this shirt," Bessie began, with that chill cordiality women know so well how to use in dissembling inward dislike, "I think

you'll be more comfortable. The coffee is ready for you."

Gretel did not trouble to reply. She stood up and loosened the oilskin coat, throwing it to one side. Underneath, Bessie saw plainly, the other woman was perfectly dry. Gretel's clinging silken sheath of shimmering green certainly became her dazzling fairness, and she looked with a mocking little smile at the plain and simple garments her hostess had brought her.

"Thanks," said she briefly. "I really don't need a change. I'm perfectly dry, thanks to your brother's care of me. And your things would hardly be my style, Miss Gillespie," she murmured sweetly.

Without a word, Bessie picked up the rejected garments and put them back on their hooks behind a cretonne curtain at the back of the room.

Mrs. Armitage, indifferent to her hostess' presence, turned to the door of Ewan's room, something subtly triumphant emanating from her as she stood there, beautiful, alluring.

"You may come out now, Ewan!" she called.

The artist opened the door and emerged from his retirement.

"But you haven't changed!" he cried out, as she moved sinuously toward him, her green silks shimmering about her lithe form.

"My dress wasn't at all wet, thank you. And it suits me better than Miss Gillespie's things," said the doctor's wife.

There was that sharp interchange of glances between the two women that betrayed to both simultaneously their harbored, mutual dislike.

Bessie poured off the coffee in silence.

"Oh, Ewan, I am so glad you brought me here! I should have died of fright in that great, dark, creepy house! How the thunder crashed! And that fearful lightning! It was terrible!"

Bessie received the impression that Gretel was quietly laughing within herself, and that the doctor's wife was not at all afraid of the storm.

"My husband will be very angry with me," Gretel murmured, then, appealing with her soft blue eyes to Ewan. "Dare I tell him how you carried me across the stream?" she half whispered.

"I had to carry her, she was so terrified and so weak," Ewan said to his sister, still proud of his exploit.

"Over that dark, swift-running water," murmured Gretel dreamily. "And then"—closing her eyes in voluptuous pleasure, her white palms upturned on her knees,—"and then ——?"

"And then," Ewan took up her words in vaunting manner, "I brought you to my door in my arms. And you fainted on the doorstep, and I brought you inside."

"Across the stream! And over your threshold! Ewan!" Gretel drawled, languidly. And then she laughed a high, shrill laugh, that she checked suddenly.

A violent spasm of shuddering seized upon Bessie.

"That was just what the doctor said must not occur," she said clearly. "You should not have come out tonight, Mrs. Armitage. I am sure he will be displeased. You were perfectly safe at home," added the girl resentfully.

Gretel turned her inscrutable face upon the girl.

"Some day," promised she, slowly, "you'll be glad that I came. Some day you'll let me kiss you," she said, with some terrible, dark menace in her light words. "Oh, you shan't push me off as you have done tonight, Miss Gillespie!"

"Bessie!" rebuked the artist, in a swift undertone. "I asked you to be kind to her!"

Mrs. Armitage spoke up quickly.

"My husband has prejudiced your

sister against me, Ewan, but that won't be for long. She will be among my closest friends, before much time passes," she prophesied, her blue eyes full upon Bessie with strangely vindictive light blazing in them, unseen by the artist.

The promise, that sounded kindly, fell upon Bessie's ears like the knell of hope. She shuddered.

"So my husband said unkind things to you behind my back, Miss Gillespie?"

Gretel's shoulders twitched with inward mirth. "How stupid men—*some* men, Ewan—can be!" she flung at the artist, with a bewitching smile.

"Well, tonight we are free of Dale's lowering presence," she cried lightly. "Let us enjoy these precious moments of freedom! Let us forget that he always comes—when I do not want him," she finished, sullenly.

Ewan went to her side as if drawn irresistibly.

CHAPTER 5

"YOU SHALL ALL BE MINE!"

"Don't sit up, dear Miss Gillespie. I can see you're sleepy," murmured the smiling Gretel pointedly, noting that Bessie had stifled an involuntary yawn more than once. "I shall do very nicely with your brother for company, and you can shut yourself into his room where our talking won't bother you."

"Most sensible thing you can do, Bess," drawled the artist.

"That coffee was too strong," complained the doctor's wife, with a charming little pout. "I know I shan't sleep all night. No, Ewan, you must not drink more or you will stay awake, too, and you must have sleep, after carrying me so far, poor tired boy."

Bessie rose reluctantly, at her brother's impatient signal, for all that she was heavy-eyed with sleep. As she turned in the doorway, she heard Gretel's dulcet tones, and saw Gretel's hand on Ewan's.

"No, Ewan, you are all tired out, battling the storm and bringing me in your strong arms. You shall sleep, tired boy, with your head in Gretel's lap, and Gretel shall watch over you, so proudly. And perhaps you will dream," went on the insinuating voice in a penetrating whisper. "Dream—Ewan—beautiful, strange dreams!"

"I'll sit at your feet, lovely lady," came Ewan's slow, drowsy voice. "Bessie, throw me one of those extra blankets, like a good girl. And—Gretel—if you should touch my hair with your satin fingers now and then—ah, how I should sleep!"

Bessie complied uneasily with her brother's request, but she did not lie down on the cot in the inner room. She drew the door to, then sat on the edge of the cot and let her disturbed thoughts ramble unchecked. So Ewan and the doctor's wife were already friendly enough to call each other by first names. . . What would the doctor say, when he came and learned what had happened? Bessie felt, in a sense, responsible, yet knew that Dale Armitage would not, could not, blame her when he learned everything.

"Sleep, tired boy, sleep!" came the crooning voice from the next room, with smooth, hypnotic suggestion. "Sleep—sleep—sleep! Dear boy—tired boy—sleep—sleep!"

Bessie's straining ears could distinguish the heavy, unnatural breathing of the young artist as he sank into obedience to those whispered words.

A long silence, broken only by those repeated words, "Sleep—sleep," and then Mrs. Armitage's voice, raised a little, called in an undertone: "Miss Gillespie! Are you awake?"

Bessie held her breath while flashing surmises and suspicions raced across her mental vision. Some powerful inhibition, as of a warning, fell upon her and she held her peace, feeling that her guest in the next room

was listening with bated breath for the calm, even breathing that would indicate that she slept. Again came the call.

"Ewan is sleeping, with his head on my knees. I am simply perishing for a drink of water, but I dislike to rouse him. Will you bring me a glass, please?"

"She does not want water," thought Bessie to herself. "She only wishes to discover if I am sleeping or awake. I shall not speak. Let her believe me asleep. Then I shall find out why she wishes to be alone, completely alone, with Ewan."

A deep, patient sigh from without apprized Bessie that Gretel was utilizing her final weapon; attempting to rouse her to a feeling of pity. She maintained her stoical silence. And then, such a quiet fell upon the little cabin as she had never before experienced. It was a stillness full of menace; a silence alive with intuitive warnings of such a nature that she could not puzzle out their hidden meanings, but sat on the edge of Ewan's cot, shaking with nervous chills and struggling almost in vain to control herself against the threat of that dread quiet, that to her soul was screaming significances.

The night had grown still, also. The storm had long since died away; not even a distant rumbling disturbed the serenity of the summer silence. To Bessie, sitting with straining ears and alert consciousness, it seemed that if only a cricket could have chirped or a bird called, that silence would have been less ominous. For the darkness was full of—*things*. They seemed actual entities, those hovering, groping, crawling *things* that were the vilely evil thoughts of *someone*. They crowded all about her. She huddled back against the wall, cheeks blanched, hazel eyes staring open in the opaque darkness, her breath controlled softly so as not to attract *their* attention unduly. God, how terrible must be someone's thoughts, to clog the very atmosphere with that potent, evil influence!

At last she could bear it no longer. Something drove her to her feet, with infinite precautions against disturbing the sleeper—or sleepers—in the adjoining room. She tiptoed across the rough board floor and drew the door toward her until the opening widened and she could look out into the other room. At what she saw, the outraged blood leaped into her brown cheeks. Her eyes flashed with mingled scorn and indignation.

GRETEL ARMITAGE had loosened her abundance of flaxen hair so that it hung like a misty cloud about the young artist, whose head lay on her knees. She was bending over him closely, her face against his—Bessie was sure—behind that voluptuous veil of pale, rippling fairness.

"Mrs. Armitage!" cried out the girl sharply.

Gretel lifted her head with a jerk, somehow awful in its automaton-like stiffness, until the long, pale locks whipped across Ewan's calm face like writhing serpents. She swept one hand upward and drew the back of it across her lips, that looked more brilliantly red than ever in the shaded light of the kerosene lamp. The gesture was for all the world like that of the thwarted small boy caught at his mother's jam-jars, as he wipes off on his sleeve the evidence of his guilt. But her eyes, as she raised them flashing upon the startled and shrinking girl in the doorway, were not the sheepish, ingenuous eyes of a small boy; they were the bitterly hard, shrewd eyes of one very old in the evil experiences of life. Moreover, they held within their flaming depths—reflected perhaps from the kerosene lamp upon the table—the same angry red which Bessie had seen that first night in the living room at the doctor's lodge, a warning and a menace.

Gretel's parted lips curled back against her flashing white teeth, that clamped together with a clicking sound as of anger, but did not speak. To Bessie there was something worse than speech in the other woman's contemptuous silence. There was something about the writhing crimson lips, the wrinkling aquiline nose, the redly flaring eyes, that was infinitely harder to bear unmoved than would have been any sarcastic or harsh words spoken in that moment of detection.

The tension of that silence was broken by the young man, who gave a long, quivering sigh in his sleep. The effect upon the two women was entirely different. Mrs. Armitage drooped over the sleeper with a deep sound in her throat, almost like a snarl, and cast her arms about and over the young man's unconscious head like a dog that covers a choice bone to keep it from some other canine rival. Bessie Gillespie threw her brown bobbed head back and drew in a long breath as if to reanimate the shattered remnants of her lingering courage. She walked across the floor to the huddled pair and took her brother by the shoulder, loosening and pushing back Gretel's reluctant hands.

At the rough but effective shaking she administered, Ewan sat up dreamily, eyes still befogged with sleep, and put one hand to his throat, which he began to stroke, a puzzled expression on his face. Then realization came to him, and the blood darkened his face and neck warmly. Shamefaced, he sprang to his feet.

"Jove! I'd no intention to be so rude! I must have fallen asleep. Mrs. Armitage, I beg ten thousand pardons," he exclaimed, "for it was insufferable of me. Bessie, how could you let me do such a thing?"

"It was not her fault—Mr. Gillespie," said the doctor's wife pointedly, her hands writhing in her lap like uneasy serpents disappointed of their prey. "You were tired, and I—I really wanted you to sleep, poor Ewan."

She spoke now like a hurt, rebuked child, half drowsily, but her flushed face and lively eyes belied her words. A new force seemed to emanate from her. It was as if she had drawn, in the silent watches of the night, upon some secret source of nourishment.

"I think I'd better go back to the lodge," she continued, after a moment, with a covert glance at Bessie's still, white face. "You—you will escort me, won't you, Ewan? I'm afraid to try crossing the bridge; that log is so narrow——"

Bessie spoke up plainly, her feminine feelings stirred by Mrs. Armitage's assumption of ownership in Ewan.

"I won't stay here alone, Ewan," said she firmly. "If you must walk back with Mrs. Armitage before daylight, I'll go along, too."

Ewan glanced at the window. The morning gray was beginning to turn the darkness into shapeless shadows.

"It's morning already," said he. "You shouldn't be afraid in daylight, Bessie. Lovely lady, will you have some coffee before we go?"

Mrs. Armitage shook her head slowly, her flaxen hair undulating like pale serpents agleam in the lamplight.

"Thank you, no, Ewan. I've had ——" She broke off as if in confusion, her eyes turning under their pale lids from Ewan to Bessie.

Something tugged at Bessie's intuition sharply. It was as if she were trying to bring back an old memory that kept elusively just around the corner from her. She maintained her steady gaze, and had satisfaction in seeing the pale blue eyes with their ruby glints lower under her fixed, accusing eyes.

Gretel was replacing her hair in its usual coils.

"The pins hurt my head, and it's so heavy, I let it down," she deprecated, feeling Bessie's eyes upon her.

Bessie did not answer, but she brought a Navaho blanket for her guest to wrap about herself on the walk back to the lodge.

"You insist upon going?" asked Ewan in a displeased tone, as he saw his sister taking her heavy coat from its hook. "It isn't at all necessary, Bess," he added with emphasis.

"I told you I wouldn't stay here alone," retorted the girl, decidedly.

Mrs. Armitage flung her hostess a keen look from under those modestly lowered lashes, then, thrusting one hand through Ewan's crooked elbow, set off ahead with her escort, leaving Bessie to stumble along as best she might, behind them.

Arrived at the lodge, Gretel unlocked the door and turned to the approaching girl.

"It appears that my husband oddly enough left the key with you, a complete stranger, Miss Gillespie. But he's always doing queer things. Do you wish to lock me in now? So that you can go away with the key to my freedom in your apron pocket?" She laughed low, bitterly.

"I don't want the key, Mrs. Armitage. I would not have taken it at all had not your husband represented that you chose to be locked in, and wished someone to have it in case of an emergency. You are looking at the whole situation in the wrong light. When he returns, I shall explain how it happened that you came across the stream, into our cabin," she finished, "for that was what he told me must not happen."

"Shall you tell my husband," she cried tauntingly, "how your dear brother carried me in his arms, against his heart? Over the stream? Into his home? How he slept all night with his head on my lap? I think not, Miss Gillespie."

The doctor's wife laughed with mocking intonation.

"Shall I make Ewan stay here with me? Or do you want him to go home with you? Which will look better in my husband's eyes?" she said. "Ewan will stay with me, if I ask him. Ewan?" caressingly.

Like a man half dazed, uncertain of himself, the young artist took a hesitating step in Gretel's direction. Bessie uttered a little choking cry. She wound her fingers into his cuff and held tightly.

"That wouldn't help you, my dear girl," Mrs. Armitage observed indulgently, her amused glance taking in the girl's action. "He would always come to me when I called him. Always. Nobody can stop him—now—for he is *mine*," she asserted, malicious laughter in her voice.

"Dr. Armitage could keep him from following you," asserted Bessie, courageously. "He can hold you in check, Mrs. Armitage."

Her rosy cheeks suddenly mist-pale, Mrs. Armitage darted from the doorway. She thrust her face close to the other girl's, her pale eyes glinting redly.

"What has he told you?" she whispered with fierce eagerness. "Oh, I shall punish him for betraying me to you, you brown thing! He makes everybody fear me, with his lies!"

She caught herself, walked back to the door, took out the key and inserted it on the inside.

"Well, it appears that you and Dale have found something to dislike in common," she slurred bitterly. "And that something is Dale's wife. Well, my dear, tell him what you please. I don't know, and I don't care, how you will account for the key's being in my hands. But don't talk too much, little fool, or I shall

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"The rest was drowned in that howl of the sea-dragon, a burst of laughter boomed through a gigantic throat, and the crested head swooped at Denham."

AS THE little trading schooner drew nearer the shadowy fringes of the island, the talk on deck fell to silence. The tropic beauty of Papua was strangely repellent. Willoughby, who had impulsively answered the offer of Professor Denham to spend a year or so helping the scientist in his investigation in deep sea lore off these shores at a salary of three thousand dollars a year, rather regretted his acceptance. He felt as if mysterious tentacles of miasmic jungle swamps breathed poison in the perfume-laden off-shore wind. It was like the breath of a black panther. He took Professor Denham's letter from his pocket and read it again.

Five years before, Willoughby had been a student under Professor Denham in the University of California, and had gained a name for himself as a football star. He had regretted the circumstances which prompted Professor Denham to resign the chair of science under the storm of ridicule and protest resulting when a newspaper featured the scientist's assertion that sea-serpents really existed. The article was illustrated by a cartoon of Professor Denham and Chueng Ching, a Chinese student who was his especial protegé and devoted to Denham, in the coils of a serpent labeled "Public Opinion," depicting the agony of the Laocoon. There was the account of class experiments in transplanting the brain of one rat to the head of another, and of the practical joke perpetrated by a student assistant in substituting the brain of a female rat for that of a male, which led to riotous speculation on the campus as to the outcome of the experiment.

Willoughby had been sorry for Professor Denham. It was, however, the three thousand dollars salary that decided him to accept Denham's offer and take the next steamer from San Francisco east, re-embarking on a trading schooner for Papua, and Denham was to send a boat to take him to his own habitation.

The letter, which he re-read within sight of landing, had emphasized the necessity of "a strong fearless man, without nerves." Willoughby interpreted the phrase with a new meaning, now that he recognized the repellent fascination of Papua.

He had no sooner stepped ashore than a Chinese in oil-stained dungarees approached him and spoke:

"You allee samee Mista Will'bee, you come 'long my boat."

He had scant time to bid farewell to his acquaintances of the trading vessel when he was led to a launch lying on water so clear that she seemed to be floating on air. Her propeller churned foam and she careened a little as they rounded the point; then for hours the launch raced along the coast, where jungles brooded and river mouths showed no banks, but only trees rooted in swamp. Fighting a loneliness he could not analyze, Willoughby watched sea gardens beneath and tried to reason away a lowering depression. The Chinese ignored his tentative approaches to conversation by unbroken and stoical silence.

In the late afternoon, with her engines slowed to half-speed, the launch entered a lagoon, where echoes of her pulsations disturbed boobies on the wreck of an old ship pronged on coral spurs. The lagoon water held gaudy little fish scattering like sparks between skeleton-white roots of drowned trees. Sea life had made the wreck its prey. White decay crept up her sides and she was rooted to abysmal depths by weed. A small wharf sagged under forest creepers with tendrils trailing in the sea. The planks creaked alarmingly as Willoughby trod them following the boatman, and met the shrill hum of insects. The heat was like a furnace blast. He was aware of a throb like *tic-douloureux* pulsing incessantly, as if on distant hills the heat had a voice.

What had once been a path leading from the wharf was now overgrown. The Chinese, lathered with sweat, slashed with a knife at trailing vines. Orchids quivered like flames. The incessant hum of insects rose in loud crescendo, but as they progressed the trail became less confused with looped lianas. Sunlight filtered through branches overhead. And ever nearer came that slow beat of sound, touching nerve centers as insistently as the insect humming irritated the ear-drums.

Then the jungle was ended and Willoughby saw a bamboo palisade enclosing ground that had once been cleared and under cultivation; yet the jungle, beaten back, had swarmed again, choking the garden, creeping over the palisade and the crushed coral walk which led to a substantial dwelling with nipa-thatched roof and a vine-covered pergola leading to shore rocks which rose abruptly at one side. It was then that Willoughby understood that diapason of sound, the shock of outer seas breaking in subterranean caverns.

The Chinese who had guided him did not enter the gate, but darted beside the palisade. Willoughby heard no sign of human presence save the "shir-rr" of his boot-soles on the coral. Then a Chinese wearing the white ducks of a house-boy appeared in a doorway cut through luxuriant bougainvillea vines purple with bloom. He stood staring at Willoughby, with his hands twisting together. For a moment Willoughby felt again that sense of helplessness

bred by the jungle, the fear of encroaching death.

"Tell your boss-man that Willoughby is here," he said.

He followed the Chinese into the house. The large living room was shaded and cool. Chinese matting covered the floor. Sea-grass chairs offered ease. There were wall cases filled with labeled specimens of sea denizens, a table holding a typewriter and note-book and some loose pages of script. The house was clean and orderly, yet he still felt as if the jungle lay too close for safety.

"Boss-man, he come bimeby," ventured the Chinese plaintively.

"Where's Chueng Ching?" Willoughby knew the Chinese student had accompanied Denham to his retreat and, it was rumored, provided funds for the scientist.

"Him gone long time. I not know much." The reply brought a grimace from the house-boy, as of apprehension.

"You got one piecee ship, I go out 'longside," he added plaintively, then darted back at the sound of steps, as Professor Denham entered.

Willoughby was shocked at the change in him. Denham's skin seemed stretched over his bones, his eyes shone like those of a madman, the hand extended to Willoughby felt cold and lifeless as that of a corpse in spite of tropic heat.

"Glad you arrived, Willoughby," he said. "You've come too late to see Chueng Ching today, but he'll be here tomorrow. We'll eat, then you can rest. You'll excuse me if I write a few notes right away. I've just come from Chueng Ching and I must get them down at once."

Willoughby was a little surprized, but he followed the house-boy to a room with a bed screened by netting, took off his shoes, collar and coat and dropped on the cotton covering and dozed. He was wakened by the clink of dishes. In the living room a table was set for two, but Denham did not appear.

The house-boy hovered near, serving Willoughby eagerly, and when the coffee was brought voiced again his wistful plea, "You got one piecee ship, I go out 'longside."

He seemed to hang on Willoughby's answer. Plainly the Chinese was in the grip of fear, and the white man remembered again the encroaching jungle and the derelict rooted to sea gardens. He wished Denham would return, and went on the porch to look for his host. He did not mind the lack of courtesy, but the silence and oppression were affecting his nerves. Tropic night had fallen, the mosquitoes were vicious. Beyond the murmur of sea caverns he heard nothing, and returned to the house, to look at the specimens in wall cases, then to reach the typewriter stand where he glanced at a sheet still in the carrier. Without consciousness of reading something not intended for him, Willoughby glanced at the typing in view:

"There is now no doubt but the physical coarseness of the beast has absorbed the fine mentality of Chueng Ching. I fed him double the usual amount of chicken yesterday, and he was in a fine rage for more. His roarings are bestial. The pool was lashed to foam by his fury. And I am assured that his rage was directed toward me, his friend and companion. It is scarcely a year since he was sorrowful at the thought that I should die before he died and leave him alone. Now he is all brute and I am punished. He no longer heeds my voice. . . ."

As if the writer had been interrupted at his task, the sentence was left unfinished. Willoughby read with mingled rage and horror. Evidenlty Chueng Ching had gone insane and he had been hired to care for a madman. He resented it. Yet he was virtually a prisoner on the

island unless he could find the boatman who brought him. He stood a moment, wondering what to do. The little house-boy lingered near him constantly without giving the impression of watching, but shook his head when Willoughby demanded to see Denham.

"No can do," he said plaintively.

Willoughby went through the curtained doorway into a room evidently belonging to Chueng Ching, to judge by the embroidered tapestries moving in the draft. Chests of carved teak stood between wall cases. A table held metal tubes, with sealed ends and addressed to the Royal College at Pekin. Willoughby heard the squawking of hens and ran outside into the pergola of vines. A lantern stood beside a bamboo coop and Professor Denham was wringing the neck of a hen and tossing it on the ground while he reached for others. He looked at Willoughby, and it seemed to him that Denham's eyes held mingled fear and madness.

Then he heard the sound of water threshed as if by storm, although there was no wind and not a leaf of the vines stirred.

"Chueng Ching," said Denham. "Hungry again. Such gluttony. I wish you'd arrived earlier, but it's difficult to see him at night. Go into the house. Willoughby, and read those notes you'll find. I'll return presently and tell you all about him."

Denham gathered the slaughtered hens and darted down the vine-covered passageway of the pergola. There was the sound of an iron door banged shut, the repeated noise of water threshed violently, and Willoughby returned to the house, where he took up the typed script, arranged the pages according to numbers and glanced over them. Fear, horror, fascination held him. He forgot where he was. He was unaware of the house-boy standing mute near his chair, seeking companionship in a fear that was sapping his life. Willoughby sat on the edge of his chair, hair slowly rising, scalp prickly, his palms moist with cold sweat.

"I HAVE now the evidence that ocean depths are a desert of ice-cold water with no living organism; soundless, still, dark nothingness. A ship sinking to those depths would cease to be, ground into molecules on the ocean bed. The silence must be fearful. But greatest satisfaction of all, is the proving of my theory that sea-serpents, as they are popularly called, do exist, and that their armor of scales and longevity has preserved some of them to this day. The cavern pool is an ideal spot for such a sea denizen to lurk. Chueng Ching told me that he had heard rumors of this haunted cavern, when we were both in California, and he is as delighted as I, that we have found the thing, and my years of research are rewarded. . .

"It is three months since I added to this diary. Chueng Ching is despondent. The white spot which he tells me has been spreading for a year is only too plainly evidence of leprosy. Chueng Ching is accursed, doomed to a lingering death, a tragedy for both of us. He feels it keenly because we have found what we sought, and for him there will not be time to pursue the study of the sea-serpent. We spoke, last night, of the restrictions of man's limited span of life, the pity that we are not given enough years, even centuries, for research. One envies the sea-serpent, which is undoubtedly older than whales, older than the sequoias of California, much older than the Christian era. To judge by his length and the size of his armor plates, our dragon is centuries old. I said to Chueng Ching that I wished I could inhabit his body, and not only live indefinitely but also explore the

ocean depths, learn his manner of living and perhaps find his relatives. Chueng Ching seemed startled rather than amused . . .

"Two months later. This morning Chueng Ching asked a terrific thing of me. He pleaded the growing decay of his flesh. His fingers are already numb. He believes that I could give him the magnificent body and strength of our sea-serpent, a thought suggested no doubt by those experimental tamperings of mine in college surgery, substituting the brains of one rodent for those of another. But I could not do such a thing. Chueng Ching is a man, a brother to me, a fine mentality, a higher organism."

Willoughby ripped open his shirt, longing for a cooling breath on his skin. The shadow of the house-boy fell across his feet; the brown hands were twisting mutely. The page he had just read fell to the floor, and he seized the next.

"Chueng Ching has worked out an arrangement by which he is confident we can manage the operation. The steel net will confine the sea-serpent, a collar of steel will hold his head while I shoot ether from a spray gun. The bench, the instruments, the cauterants, are ready. Only, I am afraid. If it were not that Chueng Ching's fingers and toes are already sloughing away, I could not do this thing. He pleads all day, and moans all night. Tomorrow I shall be alone save for the house-boy Wi Wo and the boatman who is hired to call here at regular intervals."

There was the rustling of the page which Willoughby crushed in tense fingers as he took it up, and the sound of his heavy breathing.

"Chueng Ching wakened with a great fear, although he assures me that he went under the anesthetic not only reconciled but even rejoicing in a resurrection of which he felt surer than I did. He felt no pain, only fear and the sense of a great weight dragging him down. No doubt the serpent body is not yet under control of nerve telegraphy of the mind. I attribute his fear to the same cause. Time will cure both troubles. Today, I made out the first of his attempts to communicate with me. There is no doubt he speaks, but I scarce understand his words, roared in that tremendous voice. I spent hours with him, and had Wi Wo fetch my meals. I asked questions to which he could reply by a nod or shake of his great crested head. What a pity those fools who ridiculed my assertions that sea-dragons do exist, can not see this triumph!

"The vitality of Chueng Ching's body is prodigious. He revived quickly from the ether. The leprous shell of my poor friend is in the ocean depths, sewn in canvas, weighted with iron. The sea will sing a requiem. But Chueng Ching is now invulnerable and magnificent. Nothing could harm that marvelously constructed coat of mail unless it is some device of man, the destroyer."

Willoughby lifted his head and brushed his hand across his eyes. He was entering into horror that chilled his flesh, a nightmare he could not and would not believe. He abominated the crime of Denham, yet was fascinated.

"He will not take meat, yet we fed the sea-serpent he now inhabits, at regular intervals, on raw flesh. But since the change Chueng Ching will not touch it. No doubt the higher mentality of an esthete has subjugated the beast body. Today I prepared another roll of notes for the Royal College of Pekin, a rare collection of data which will receive consideration from Chinese savants that I could not wrest from my own people. Chueng Ching and I have proved the existence of sea-dragons and the ability of science through martyrdom to penetrate to the mysteries beneath the waters."

WILLOUGHBY mopped his face. Wi Wo held a tray toward him and he took a bottle it held and poured himself a peg of brandy, then seized the next page.

"Chueng Ching is timid of the dark. His fear throttles our investigations. And much that he would impart is lost through my faulty understanding of his articulation. The curse of Babel rings down the ages. He breaks into Cantonese in his endeavor to enlighten me. The finer details would be invaluable but I hoped too greatly. I can not understand his fear, and his rather pathetic regret at the loneliness he will find when I am dead. But one thing comforts me, he is taking food and prefers rather undercooked chicken and pork. I must keep a stock on hand, as his appetite is prodigious. . .

"Six months since I last wrote these notes. Chueng Ching has furnished me with priceless specimens and data of the ocean depths, the notes of which I seal daily in metal tubes to be sent to Pekin. But I notice a change in him. While at first he was afraid of the depths, he now goes fearlessly and remains for a longer period each time. The silence down there must be fearful, but he seems to like exploring, and has even identified geographic indentations of continent shores, and recognizes the chill of polar seas. . .

"Three months from my last entry. Another period of change has come over Chueng Ching. The little fish spewed from his jaws are spoiled by carelessness. Things are not going so well. There is a change of temperament and his articulation is thick. For a time he spoke clearly although in a voice like a church organ. Now he roars in sullen rage when I refuse to feed him before I obtain an account of his wanderings. I believe it was a mistake to feed him flesh. Better to have left him to find sea-food only. I wonder if the brute body is in ascendance, or if meeting other monsters of his own kind has upset him. He would know no means of communication with them, and no methods of defense, but what a spectacle it would be to view a battle of sea-dragons!. I wish it had been my lot to change from a human to this saurian. I am past middle age and the passions which plague a younger man. Chueng Ching, who in his human shape was vowed to celibacy and had devoted his life to science, is seeking a mate. He was never more lucid than when he roared to me that he had found a 'sweetie', the college slang of old days for a sweetheart, and demanded more food for strength he would need to fight off other males of his kind. With great sorrow, I must admit the end is in sight. He is indifferent to our researches and I gained nothing today but the account of this female sea-dragon, which seems coy and exhibits greater speed and endurance than Chueng Ching, as they tear through the depths, circling islands, lashing a riot of phosphorescence in the night. Oh, to see them! To find another and change from this body hampering me to a saurian like Chueng Ching!"

Cold sweat broke out on Willoughby's forehead as he took the last sheet from the typewriter, and re-read the bit which had fascinated him a little while before.

He understood perfectly what Denham had written, of the change over this *thing*. The brute body had conquered the mind of Chueng Ching. The ferocity of the sea-dragon was in ascendance. He had turned on Denham, no longer obeying the voice of the scientist. The remainder of the page held no less of horror, a prophetic intimation of Denham's fear.

"Chueng Ching is a fiend. He struck at me today with open jaws. I have sealed the complete notes to date, and addressed the results of my researches to the Royal College at

Pekin, where they will act on the instructions to use the balance of Chueng Ching's wealth to pursue this investigation in case anything should happen to me. But Willoughby has arrived, and I am confident that the skill he displayed in the science class can be enhanced by practise so that he can perform the operation I desire. Chueng Ching laughed when I told him my plan, but promised to entice another male of his kind to the pool where Willoughby and I shall trap him by means of the iron-barred gateway dropped behind this sea-dragon we used as a body for the brain of Chueng Ching. I have not talked to Willoughby about it, but I noticed he seemed as well set up and fit as in college days. His reward shall be a share of Chueng Ching's wealth, and the fame of . . ."

Willoughby crushed the sheet in his hand, every nerve in his body on edge, his breathing sounding loud in the silence. The chair crashed over as he rose and stared past Wi Wo at the curtained doorway. The embroidered dragons seemed to move with malignant life. And a more terrible dragon inhabited this place, the Madness which had caught Denham and made of him a priest of more dreadful rites than voodoo of the jungles.

Willoughby realized now for what he had been summoned by the scientist. He must escape or be caught in a trap from which there was no escape. He would find Denham, and tell him that he was going; Denham was at that moment near the pool. Willoughby remembered the chickens he had been killing, and his words: "Chueng Ching, hungry again. Such gluttony!" He remembered the sound as of water threshed by storm. Denham feared the thing, yet he had gone to it again. He might be in danger of his life. Common decency demanded that Willoughby try to save the man. As for remaining under the conditions to be imposed, his body shivered as if with nausea at the thought.

Under the vine-covered pergola, he was startled by the sight of Wi Wo in his white ducks. The hand of the Chinese fell on his arm, the man's teeth chattered like castanets. And above that chattering and Willoughby's breathing, came the sound of water crashing on rocks, threshed under flails of no wind that ever was.

Willoughby stalked down the pergola, gripping his courage in his hand, assuring himself the typing was the fantasy of a madman, and that the worst he would find would be Denham in the violence of insanity brought on by loneliness and the eery mystery of the island. The heelless slippers of Wi Wo shuffled reluctantly as they came near an iron door, with light from beyond shining through the space between heavy bars. Willoughby saw the lantern on the stone floor. Steps led down. There was the crash of waves subsiding gradually, and a low moaning audible.

Willoughby opened the iron door, snatched up the lantern and began to descend the steps. A cool wind swept upward, a smell of sea-wrack and cavern chill. He saw the oily luminance of water where the sea filled a natural cove. It was stirred as by violent upheaval from beneath. The rock ledge below glistened with minute sea life. He saw something resembling a huge horsecollar slung to iron rings in the cavern roof, and a steel net dependent from ropes, the apparatus of that operation performed on the sea-dragon. Along one side was a litter of things scarcely discernible by the faint lantern light.

With his scalp prickling, Willoughby held the lantern at arm's length, to learn what manner of gigantic bird it was that ran to and fro on the ledge, uttering squawks of fear which the cavern echoed. He saw a heap of

dead chickens on the ledge, then a movement of Wi Wo caught his eye. The Chinese was retreating up the steps, backward, his eyes staring at the pool, his hands groping along the rock wall. Willoughby looked again at the pool, straining his vision to see what had thralled Wi Wo and turned his yellow skin green with terror.

It came like gushing light in the depths, stirring the black water, a radiance of glittering unrest, undulating flitter and shadow, faintly phosphorescent; then coils broke a moving swirl in the gloom.

Willoughby turned to run up the steps. The breath of Wi Wo hissed between his teeth. There was the silken slur of water washing the rock, and in another moment Willoughby was crowding the Chinese on the steps, for the water parted and a crested head was upreared, water dripping from fanged jaws, red tongue quivering, large glassy eyes regarding the two men on the steps with malevolent glaring. Coils of a serpent body upreared. Willoughby saw the great scales like iridescent metal plates. There was that threshing hiss of water, tremendous in the cavern walls. Willoughby's heart was pounding in his throat and wrist. Fear paralyzed him.

Then he screamed. From that great throat came a roar that swelled and boomed, and in that sound Willoughby heard unmistakably the name of "Denham" howled in wrath.

His own scream seemed to be echoed by the flapping white thing on the ledge. For the first time he realized that he had lost the chance for what he came to do: to save Denham. That was Denham—that mad disheveled thing clad in white ducks which was bent nearly double, waving its coat-tail over its head. It stood erect, laughing horribly.

"Chueng Ching," it called, "did you bring your sea-dragon? See, Willoughby is here, Willoughby who will make me invulnerable so we can rove the deeps together . . ."

The rest was drowned in that howl of the sea-dragon, a burst of laughter boomed through a gigantic throat, and the crested head swooped at Denham. The sea leaped, a wave shot by those armored coils crashed up the steps and over Willoughby. The lantern fell from his numbed fingers, the sea was in his mouth.

Then he felt the hands of Wi Wo clutching him. They were crouched in a heap on the steps. The pool was dark and the seas fell quiet. Willoughby felt his way a few steps lower and saw the outer archway of the cove. Dawn had bloomed, early tropic dawn shone silver. The ledge was empty. Denham had disappeared.

Willoughby turned and pushing the terrified Chinese before him went up the steps, clanging and bolting the iron door.

He strode through the house, looked at the sealed tube of notes addressed ready to send, and at the typed account of Denham's crime. Then he went to the porch.

A voice at his shoulder startled him: "You got one piecee ship, I go out 'long you." The plaintive wail was chattered through quivering lips.

"Come on," snapped Willoughby and ran down the path.

Along the palisade sauntered the Chinese boatman. Willoughby took money from his pocket and offered it.

"Take us back to the port," he commanded. "Quick!"

SI URAG of the TAIL

by Oscar Cook

"Slowly the pistil of the great orchid curved inward. Over the golden bell-shaped center it poised. Then it bent its head; its silver rim distended and then closed."

DENNIS sat on the veranda of his bungalow, and gazed meditatively around him. He could not look at the view because there was none to speak of, since the house was built on an island in the middle of the Luago River. On all sides of the island grew the tall rank elephant grass and nipa-palm. Here and there a stunted, beetle-ridden coconut tree just topped the dense vegetation, a relic of some clearing and plantation commenced by some native, then left to desolation and the ever-encroaching jungle.

Dennis was bored. He was two years overdue for leave; also the day was unusually hot. The hour was about 4, but though the sun was beginning to slant there was no abatement in the fierceness of its rays. After lunch he had followed the immemorial custom and undressed for a short siesta, but sleep was denied him. The mechanical action of undressing had quickened his brain. The room seemed stifling; the bed felt warm. He bathed, dressed and betook himself to the veranda. Here he smoked and thought.

And his thoughts were none too pleasant, for there was much that was troubling him. Throughout the morning he had been listening to the endless intricacies of a native land case—a dispute over boundaries and ownership. He had reserved his judgment till the morrow, for the evidence had been involved and contradictory. He had meant to go over the salient points during the afternoon, and instead, here he was seated on his veranda, smoking and thinking of an entirely different matter. Try

as he would, his mind would not keep on the subject of the land, but roamed ever and ever over the mystery that was fast setting its seal of terror and fear on the district.

From a village in the *ulu* (source) of the river strange rumors had come floating downstream. At first they were as light and airy as thistledown —just a passing whisper—a fairy story over which to smile;—then they passed, but came again, more substantial and insistent, stronger and sterner and not to be denied. Their very number compelled a hearing; their very sameness breathed a truth. Inhabitants from the village had gone forth and never returned; never a trace of them had been found. First a young girl, then her father. She had been absent six days and he had gone to look for her. But he looked in vain and in his turn disappeared. Then a young boy, and next an aged woman. Then, after a longer period, a tame ape and finally the headman's favorite wife.

Fear settled on the village; its inhabitants scarce dared leave their houses, save in batches to collect water and food. But Fear travels fast and the rumors reached Klagan and came to Dennis' ears. In the end the mystery caught him in its toils, weaved itself into his every waking moment and excited his interest beyond control.

An idle native story: the tale of a neighboring village with an ax of its own to grind. He was a fool to worry over it. Such mare's nests were of almost daily occurrence, thus Dennis argued; and then from two other villages came similar tales. Two little girls had gone to bathe in the height of the noonday sun. At moonrise they had not returned. Nor in the days that passed were they ever seen again. Two lovers met one moonlight night and waded to a boulder in midstream of the river. Here they sat oblivious of the world around them. They were seen by a couple of natives passing downstream in their boat and then—never again.

Down the river crept the cold, insidious Fear like a plague, taking toll of every village in its path. In their houses huddled the natives, while crops were unsown and pigs uprooted the plantations; while crocodiles devoured untended buffaloes, and squirrels and monkeys rifled the fruit trees. From source to mouth the Fear crept down and in the end forced Dennis' hand, compelling him to action.

Thus as he sat on his veranda and cursed the heat of the sun and the humidity of the tropics, unbidden and unsought the mystery filled his thoughts; and he began to wonder as to if and when his native sergeant and three police would return. For he had sent them to the *ulu* to probe and solve the meaning of the rumors. They had been gone three weeks, and throughout this time no word had been heard of or come from them.

In the office a clock struck 5. Its notes came booming across to Dennis. Then silence—not complete and utter stillness; such is never possible in the tropics, but the silence of that hour when the toilers—man and animal—by day realize that night is approaching; when the toilers by night have not yet awakened.

Lower and lower sank the sun. In the sky a moon was faintly visible. Dennis rose, about to call for tea, then checked the desire. From afar upstream came the chug, chug, chug of a motorboat. Its beat just reached his ears. He looked at his wrist watch. In ten minutes he would go down to the floating wharf. That would give him plenty of time to watch the boat round the last bend of the river. In the meanwhile——

But he went at once to the wharf after all, for the mystery gripped him, causing him feverishly to pace up and down the tiny floating square.

Chug, chug, chug, louder and louder came the noise; then fainter and fainter and then was lost altogether as the dense jungle cut off the sound as the boat traversed another bend of the river. Chug, chug, chug, faintly, then louder and stronger. A long-drawn note from the horn of a buffalo smote the air and the boat swung round the final bend. Only a quarter of a mile separated it now from Dennis.

As the boat drew nearer he saw that she was empty save for the serang (helmsman) and boatmen. Then the Fear gripped him, too, and he quickly returned to the house. With shaking hand he poured out a whisky and soda, flung himself into a chair and shouted for his "boy."

"*Tuan!*" The word, though quietly spoken, made him flinch, for the "boy" had approached him silently, as all well-trained servants do. Quickly, too, he had obeyed the summons, but in that brief space of time Dennis' mind had escaped his body and immediate wants to roam the vast untrodden fields of speculation and fear.

With an effort he pulled himself together.

"The motorboat is returning. Tell the serang to come to me as soon as he has tied her up. See that no one is within earshot."

"*Tuan.*" And the boy departed.

SCARCELY had the boy left than the serang stood in front of Dennis. His story was brief, though harrowing, but it threw no light upon the mystery. For two days, till they reached the rapids, they had used the motorboat. Then they trans-shipped into a native dugout, leaving the motor in charge of a village headman. For three days they had paddled and poled upstream till they came to the mouth of the Buis River. Here the sergeant and police left them, telling them to wait for their return, and struck inland along a native track. For sixteen days they waited, though their food had given out and they had taken turns to search the jungle for edible roots. Then on the sixteenth day it happened—the horrible coming of Nuin.

The boatmen had gone to look for roots. The serang was dozing in a dugout. Suddenly it shook and rocked. Something clutched the serang's arm. It was Nuin's hands. Startled into wakefulness, the serang sat up; then he screamed and covered his eyes with his hands. When he dared look again Nuin was lying on the river bank. His clothes were in rags. Round his chest and back ran a livid weal four inches wide. His left leg hung broken and twisted. His right arm was entirely missing. His face was caked in congealed blood.

As the serang looked, Nuin opened his lips to speak, but his voice was only a whisper. Tremblingly, haltingly, the serang went to him, and put his ear to his mouth. "Sergeant—others — dead — three days — west—man—with—big—big—others." The whisper faded away; Nuin gave a shudder and was dead.

They buried him near the river and then left, paddling night and day till they reached the rapids. A night they spent in the village, for they were racked with sleeplessness, and they left the next morning, reaching Klagan the same day.

Such was the serang's report.

The Fear spread farther down the river till it reached the sea and spread along the coast.

In the barracks that night were two women who would never see their men again; was born a baby, who would never know his father; wept a maiden for the lover whose lips she would never kiss again.

AS THE earliest streaks of dawn came stealing across the sky, the chugging of a motorboat broke the stillness of the night. Dennis him-

self was at the wheel, for the serang was suffering with fever. With him were nine police and a corporal. They carried stores for twenty days.

The journey was a replica of the serang's, save that at the village by the rapids no friendly headman or villagers took charge of the motor-boat. The village had fled before the Fear. On the fifth day Buis was reached as the setting sun shot the sky with blood-red streamers.

On the banks of the river the earth was uprooted; among the loosened earth were human bones and the marks of pigs' feet. Among the bones was a broken tusk, sure sign of some fierce conflict that had raged over Nuin's remains.

Dennis shuddered as he saw the scene; his Murut police, pazans from the interior of North Borneo, fingered their charms of monkeys' teeth and dried snake-skins that hung around their necks or were attached to the rotan belts around their waists, that carried their heavy *parangs* (swords).

Occasionally throughout the night the droning noise of myriad insects was broken by the shrill bark of deer or kijang. Sometimes the sentry, gazing into the vast blackness of the jungle, saw the beady eyes of a pig, lit up for a moment by the flames of the campfire. Sometimes a snake, attracted by the glare, glided through the undergrowth, then passed on. Once or twice a nightjar cried and an owl hooted—eery sounds in the pitch-black night. Otherwise a heavy brooding stillness, like an autumn mist, crept over the jungle and enveloped the camp. Hardly a policeman slept; but dozed and waked and dozed and waked again, only to wake once more and feel the Fear grow ever stronger. Dennis, on his camp-bed under a *kajang* awning, tossed and tossed the long night through.

Dawn broke to a clap of thunder. Rain heralded in the new day.

"Three days—west." This was all Dennis knew; all he had to guide him. For this and the next two days the party followed a track that led steadily in a westerly direction. On the evening of the third day it came out into a glade. Here Dennis pitched his camp. The tiny space of open sky and glittering stars breathed a cooler air and purer fragrance than the camps roofed in by the canopy of mighty trees. Thus the tired and haunted police slept and Dennis ceased his tossing. Only the sentry was awake—or should have been. Perhaps he, too, dozed or fell fast asleep, for a few unconscious moments. If so he paid a heavy penalty.

Dennis awoke the next morning at a quarter to 6 to see only the smoldering remains of the campfire.

"Sentry!" he called. But no answer was vouchsafed. "Sentry!" he cried again, but no one came. Aroused by his voice the sleeping camp stirred to wide and startled awakeness.

The corporal came across to Dennis, saluted, then stood at attention waiting.

"The fire's nearly out; where's the sentry?" Dennis queried.

The corporal looked around him, gazed at the smoldering fire, counted his men, then looked at Dennis with fear-stricken eyes.

"*Tuan!*" he gasped; "he is not—there are only eight men!"

"Is not? What d'you mean? Where's he gone?" As Dennis snapped his question cold fear gripped his heart. He knew; some inner sense told him that the man had disappeared in the same mysterious fashion as those early victims. Here, in the midst of his camp, the terrible, unseen thing had power!

"Where's he gone?" Dennis repeated his question fiercely to quench his rising fear. "What d'you mean?"

For answer the corporal only stood and trembled. His open twitching mouth produced no sound.

With an oath Dennis flung himself from his bed. "Search the glade, you fool," he cried, "and find his tracks! He can't be far away. No, stay," he added as the corporal was departing. "Who is it?"

"Bensaian, *Tuan,*" gasped the terrified man.

Dennis' eyes narrowed and a frown spread over his face.

"Bensaian!" he repeated. "He was Number 3. His watch was from 12 till 2."

"*Tuan!*"

"Then he's never been relieved. From 2 o'clock at least, he's been missing!"

"*Tuan!* I must have slept. I saw Auraner relieve Si Tuah, but I was tired and——"

"Search for his tracks," Dennis cried, breaking in on his protestations, "but see no man enters the jungle."

In that tiny glade the search was no prolonged affair, but no traces of the missing man were found—save one. A brass button, torn from his tunic, lay at the foot of a mighty billian tree. But where and how he had gone remained a mystery. Only the regular footprints as he had walked to and fro on his beat were just discernible and these crossed and recrossed each other in hopeless confusion.

Over the tops of the trees the sun came stealing, bathing the glade in its warming light, but Dennis heeded it not.

"Three days—west." The words kept hammering in his brain, as he sat on the edge of his bed and smoked cigarette after cigarette. Up and down the glade a sentry walked. Round the fire the police were crouched cooking their rice; over another Dennis' boy prepared his *tuan's* breakfast.

At length, when ready, he brought it over to him, poured out his coffee and departed to join the whispering police. But though the coffee grew cold and flies settled on the food, Dennis sat on, unmoved, deep in his distraction.

This was the fourth day! For three days they had journeyed west, following Nuin's almost last conscious words. The glade was hemmed in by the impenetrable jungle; no path led out of it save that along which they had come. It formed a cul-de-sac indeed! And Bensaian was missing!

As Dennis sat and pondered, this one great fact became predominant. Bensaian was missing. Then what did it mean? Only that here the thing had happened, lived or breathed or moved about. Here, then, would be found the answer to the riddle! In this little glade of sunlight must they watch and wait. Into the trackless jungle he dared not enter, even if his men could hack a path. To return the way they had come would make his errand worse than fruitless. Watching and waiting only remained.

So they waited. Day turned to evening and evening into night; the dawn of another day displaced the night; the sun again rode over the tops of the jungle. But nothing happened. Only the policemen grew more frightened; only Dennis' nerves grew more frayed. Then once again the night descended, but no one in the camp dared really sleep.

UP AND down walked the sentry, resting every now and then, as he turned, against the billian tree. A gentle breeze stirred the branches of the encircling trees, bearing on the air a faint aromatic smell, that soothed the nervous senses of the resting camp, as a narcotic dispels pain. One by one the police ceased whispering and gently dozed, calmed by the sweet fragrance. Dennis ceased his endless smoking; stretched

himself at ease upon his bed. The sense of mystery seemed forgotten by all; a sense of peace seemed brooding over them.

Midnight came and the wakeful sentry was relieved. His relief, but half awake, railed at his fate—the half-unconscious dozing was so pleasant, and this marching up and down the glade, while others rested, so utterly to his distaste.

As for the fortieth time he turned about at the base of the great billian tree, he lowered his rifle, rested for a few seconds with his hands upon its barrel, then leaned against the dark ridged stem; just for a moment he would rest, his rifle in his hands —just for a moment only, then once again take up his beat.

The wind in the trees was gradually increasing; the fragrance on the air became more pronounced. The camp was almost wrapt in slumber. On his bed Dennis sleepily wondered whence came the pleasing, soothing odor, that seemed to breathe so wondrous a peace. Against the billian tree the sentry still was leaning; his rifle slipped from the faint grasp of his hands, but he heeded not the rattle as it struck the ground.

Peace in the glade from whence came so much mystery! Peace while the dread, though unknown, agent drew near apace!

Down from the top of the billian tree It slowly descended, branch by branch; slowly, carefully, silently, till it rested on the lowest branch still thirty feet above the sentry.

The bark of a deer broke the stillness of the night. From afar came an answering note. Somehow the sound awakened the sentry. He looked around him, saw the fire was burning bright, picked up his fallen rifle and commenced to walk about.

Down the far side of the tree a bark rope descended till its weighted end just rested on the ground. Down the rope, a man, naked save for a bark-made loin-cloth, descended till he, too, reached the earth. Then, pressed flatly to the great tree's trunk, he waited.

Across the glade the sentry turned about. With listless, heavy steps he was returning. Nearer and nearer he approached. At the foot of the billian tree he halted, turned and leaned against its trunk. The tension of his limbs relaxed. The rifle slipped from his grasp, but hung suspended by the strap that had become entangled over his arm. A light unconsciousness, hardly to be designated sleep, stole over him. From the camp there was no sign of wakefulness.

Slowly a figure crept noiselessly round the tree and stood gazing at the policeman. Naked indeed he was, save for the *chawat* (loin-cloth) of bark; his thick black hair hung over his neck and reached beyond his shoulders, framing a face out of which gleamed two fanatical shining eyes. His body to the waist was covered with tattoo. From each of his breasts the designs started, spreading to waist-line and round to the back. The nipple of each breast gleamed a fiery burnished gold, while from their fringe spread outward, like a full-blown flower, five oval petals of wondrous purple hue. From the golden center of each flower ten long pistils spread, curving downward and round his body. At their source they too were of a purple hue, but as they reached the petals their color turned to gleaming gold which slowly changed to glistening silver as their ridged ends were reached. These ridged ends were circular and their silver rims framed brilliant scarlet mouths, shaped like the sucking orifice with which the huge and slimy horse-leech gluts its loathsome thirst for blood.

The man's arms were unusually long; his finger-nails had never been clipped; the splay of his toes, especial-

ly between the big and the next one, uncommonly wide.

One hand still clutched the bark rope; the other hung loosely at his side. Though he was tall, standing five feet ten inches, and heavily built, he moved as lightly as a cat.

Lightly he let go the rope and extended his two long arms toward his unconscious prey. The cry of a nightjar sounded close at hand. The somnolent sentry stirred as the sound just reached his brain. With a spring the man was upon him. One hand upon his mouth; one arm around his chest pinioning his arms to his side. With a swiftness incredible he reached the far side of the tree, let go his grasp upon the sentry's mouth, and using the rope as a rail commenced to climb step over step with an amazing agility.

"*Tolong!*" (help). The cry laden with overwhelming fear rent the stillness of the night. "*Tol——*"

All further sound ended in a gurgle as the relentless pressure round the sentry's chest squeezed out all breath from his body. The camp at that sudden cry of human agony and fear awoke to life. Instinctively the police seized their rifles: the corporal blew fiercely on his whistle; Dennis hurriedly pulled on his mosquito boots and picked up his revolver from under his pillow.

"Corporal!"

"*Tuan!*"

"*Siapa itu?*" (who's that?)

The cries rent the air simultaneously. Then came silence for the fraction of a second, as everyone stared hopelessly at one another as they realized the glade was empty of the sentry.

"Si Tuah! Tuah!" Dennis' voice rose in a long cry, breaking the sudden silence that followed the camp's awakening. "Tu-ah," he called again.

Somewhere from among the trees came a sound—a kind of muffled sob—a choking, gurgling cry of fear. To the edge of the jungle close to the billian tree Dennis and the corporal darted.

"Look, *Tuan!* a rope!" the latter gasped.

"My God!" Dennis whispered. "What does it mean?"

"It's made of bark and——" began the corporal, but the rest of his words were drowned by a loud report.

"*Jaga! Tuan, Jaga!*" (look out!) he cried as a jumbled shape came hurtling down from the branches of the tree and the frayed ends of the rope came writhing about them. The snapping of a twig overhead, and a smoking rifle fell at their feet.

As the shape reached the ground with a sickening bump, two figures fell apart and then lay still.

"Seize that man and bind him!" Dennis cried, pointing to the naked form as he bent over the prostrate figure of Si Tuah. "Gently, men, gently," he added as four police picked him up and carried him over to their *kajang* shelter.

His left arm hung loosely by his side, two ribs were also broken, but his heart still faintly beat. Dennis poured a little brandy down his throat. Slowly Si Tuah came to. He tried to rise to sitting posture, but fell back with a groan of pain.

"He came upon me from behind the tree—I must have dozed," he muttered. "He picked me up—the pressure of his grasp was awful—and then commenced to climb the tree, holding the rope as a rail and walking up step by step. I struggled—just as we neared the branches his grip slackened—I could not cry—I had no breath—I only groaned, I struggled once again—my foot kicked the butt of my rifle—my toe found the trigger and I pressed and pressed—there came a report—we fell—and——"

Si Tuah had fainted again. Dennis' eyes met those of the corporal. "The shot must have severed the rope," he whispered.

"*Tuan*, his *nasib* (fate) was good," the corporal answered, and they crossed to where the human vulture lay, one leg twisted under him, his *chawat* all awry. As the policemen rolled him over on his face to knot the ropes—they showed but little pity for his unconscious state—the *chawat* came undone and slipped from his waist.

"Look, *Tuan*, look!" the corporal gasped, and pointed with shaking finger. "Look, he has a tail—it's not a man—it has a tail!" And feverishly he fingered the charms that hung around his neck.

Dennis looked, following the pointing finger, then bending down, looked long and closely. It was as the corporal said. The man possessed a tail—a long hard protuberance that projected from his spine for about four inches.

"Bring him to the camp," he ordered. "Place two sentries: one over him, one on the camp. He is only stunned; there are no bones broken. In the morning when Tuah's better we'll learn some more."

DENNIS walked across to his bed. The Fear was gone, but the mystery was still unexplained. The campfire burnt brightly, giving out a smell of pungent wood smoke. The soothing aromatic scent of an hour ago was no more. From the police came intermittent whisperings; from the man with the tail nought but heavy breathing. On his bed Dennis tossed and wondered.

As the early dawn first faintly flooded the sky, shriek upon shriek rent the air. Si Tuah had become delirious. The man with the tail awoke and listened. From a group of police squatting over a fire their voices reached him. His eyes blinked in perplexity. Quietly as he lay, he dug with his nails a small round hole in the earth about five inches deep. Then gingerly he moved and in spite of his bonds sat up. From his bed Dennis watched him. Into the hole he fitted his tail, then looked at his bonds and the group of police. He opened his mouth, but no sound came forth. His tied hands he stretched out to them. His face expressed a yearning. It was as if their voices brought a comfort or recalled a past. Then tear after tear rolled down his cheeks.

Calling the corporal, Dennis crossed to the weeping man. At Dennis' approach he looked up, then with a cry buried his face in his bound hands and rocked his body to and fro. He was afraid—afraid of a white man, the like of which he had never seen before.

"Peace, fool!" the corporal said roughly, speaking unconsciously in Murut, "stop your wailing, the *tuan* is no ghost but a man, albeit all-powerful."

Slowly the tailed being ceased his weeping and looked up. "A man!" he muttered. "A man and the color of the gods!" He spoke a bastard Murut and Malay that caused Dennis to start and the corporal to frown in perplexity, for his meaning was clear, though many of the words, though akin to either language, were yet unlike either. But they understood him.

"And your name?" Dennis asked, in Malay, but the being only shook his head in fear, extending his hands in supplication.

"Loosen his bonds," Dennis commanded. "Ask him his name and tribe and village."

The corporal obeyed, and then translated.

The man's name was Si Urag. He came of a Murut race that years ago had captured some Malay traders. All had been killed except the women. These had been made to marry the

headmen. Then came a plague and nearly all died. The remnants, according to custom, moved their village. For days and days they walked in the trackless jungle. Then from the trees they were attacked by a race of dwarfs who lived in houses in the branches. All save him were killed. He lay stunned; when he recovered consciousness he saw that the dwarfs had tails and that they were disemboweling the dead and dying and hanging their entrails round their necks. Fear seized him. He tried to rise and run away. He staggered to his feet, tottered a yard or two and then collapsed. Terrified, face downward, he waited for his foes. With a rush of feet they came. He waited for the blow. It never fell. Suddenly he felt a gentle pull upon his tail—the tail over which all his life he had been ridiculed: then came a muttering of voices. From the face of the moon a cloud passed by. He was in a glade and lying near a pool. Over the air a heavy scent was hanging. Suddenly the waters stirred. Out of their depths a flaming gold and purple flower arose. Ten tentacles spread out with gaping, wide-open, blood-red mouths. Shriek upon shriek of utter agony rent the air. Into the flaming golden center each tentacle, curving inward, dropped a dwarf. Into the depths of the pool the flower sank down. All was still. Si Urag was alone.

That night he slept in a house among the branches of a tree. The surviving dwarfs had fled.

In the morning he collected the corpses of his friends and placed them near the lake. That night from his tree-house he watched. The moon was one day off the full. When at its highest point in the sky, the waters of the pool became disturbed. Again the golden-purple flower arose from its depths and the soothing scent spread over the jungle. Again the red-mouthed tentacles spread over the shore and sucked up the corpses, curved themselves in toward the golden center, dropped in its bell-shaped mouth the stiffened bodies. Once again the human-feeding flower sank beneath the waters. Once again all was still. Gradually the narcotic smell grew less; slowly the moon sank in the west. All was dark and silent.

On the next and two following nights the flower appeared. Each night the hungry tentacles sought for food—human or animal. Then with the waning of the moon the flower rose up no more. Still in his tree-house Si Urag watched and lived. Where else was he to go? His tribe was killed; the dwarfs had fled and of them he was afraid. On account of his tail he was shy to intermingle with other humans, even if he knew where to find them. Here was his house, safe from wild beasts that roamed at night; in the pool were many fish, in the jungle many roots and fruit. Here was the wondrous flower that fed on men, that spread its wondrous scent, to whom he felt he owed his life. Here, then, he would live and consecrate his life in a kind of priesthood to the flaming gold and purple orchid.

The corporal ceased and his eyes met those of Dennis. There was no need to answer the unspoken question in them. The mystery of those disappearances was explained.

"And that?" Dennis pointed to the tattooing on the prisoner's body.

Si Urag understood the gesture, if not the words.

"Is the picture of the Flower I serve," he answered, looking at the corporal. "Two nights ago I fed it with a man clothed like that"—and he pointed to the police. "A night ago I caught a pig and deer; last night I caught a man"—he pointed to where Si Tuah lay in his delirium—"but a magic spoke from out a tube that flashed fire and the rope was severed and——" He shrugged his shoulders with a world of meaning,

then, "I am hungry; give me some rice," he begged.

For a while he ate his fill. Then when the sun rose high over the little glade Dennis questioned him further, and from his answers formed a great resolve.

The glade of the golden-purple flower was but a few miles away. A little cutting of the jungle, and a hidden path—Si Urag's path—would be found. That night the moon would be but two days past its zenith, the wondrous flower would rise for the last time for a month—or rise never to rise again, hoped Dennis.

Si Urag was complacent. Was it fear or cunning? Who could tell? His face was like a mask as he agreed to lead the little party to the pool where dwelt the sacred flower.

THE hour was after midnight. In the camp three police watched the delirious Si Tuah. Along a narrow track that led from the jungle to a pool, silently stole eight men. In the west a clipped moon was slowly sinking. Out of the jungle crept the men, into a glade silvered by the light of the moon.

"To the right ten paces ex——" Dennis' whispered orders faded away, giving place to a breathless gasp of surprize. There in the middle of the pool was the great golden-purple flower, its center flaming gold, its petals deepest purple, its ten pistils curling and waving about—curling and waving toward the little group of men as they emerged from the track; the blood-red, silver-rimmed mouths opening and shutting in hungry expectation. Over the glade lay the heavy aromatic scent.

Speechless, spellbound, the little party looked at the wondrous, beautiful sight. The deadening spell of that narcotic scent was spreading through their veins. Lower and lower slowly sank the moon.

Si Urag fell upon his knees, covered his face with his hands and commenced to mumble a prayer. His action jerked the rope with which he was attached to Dennis and the corporal. With a start the former awoke as from a trance. All the waving pistils were pointing and stretching toward the huddled group. The moon was nearly touching the farther edge of the sky. Soon—soon——

"To the right ten paces extend!" Like pistol shots Dennis' words broke in upon the night. Unconsciously, automatically, the police obeyed. Si Urag remained in prayer. "Load!" The one word cut the stillness like a knife. The waving pistils changed their curves—followed the extending men, stretched and strained their blood-red mouths.

"At point-blank—fire!" Six tongues of flame; one loud and slightly jagged report. Four pistils writhed and twisted in an agony of death. In the flaming golden center, a jagged hole. The heavy aromatic scent came stealing stronger and stronger from the maimed and riddled center. The moon just touched the far horizon. Slowly the wondrous flower began to sink, the waters became disturbed, the pistils seemed to shrink.

Si Urag rose from his knees and prayers; uncovered his ears, over which he had placed his hand at the sound of the report. From Dennis to the corporal he looked in mute and utter supplication. From head to foot he trembled.

Slowly the moon and flower were sinking. One pistil, bigger, stronger, fuller-mouthed than the rest, seemed reluctant to retreat, but pointed and waved at the silent three.

Into his *chawat* Si Urag dived his hand. Quick as lightning he withdrew it. A slash to the right, another to the left, and he was free. A mighty spring, a piercing cry and he hurled himself, as a devotee, into the great

ravenous blood-red mouth. Slowly the pistil curved inward. Over the golden bell-shaped center it poised. Then it bent its head; its silver rim distended and then closed. Si Urag was no more.

The moon sank down out of sight; the wondrous flower with its maddened, fanatical victim slipped beneath the waters of the pool. The stillness of the jungle remained; the scent of dew-laden earth arose. Darkness—and a memory—surrounded the group of seven.

The tropic sleepiness of 3 p. m. hung over Klagan. Suddenly the chugging of a motorboat was heard coming from afar upstream. Down to the tiny floating wharf the populace descended, headed by the serang. Round the last bend swung the motorboat, drew alongside the wharf and came to rest. Out of it silently stepped Dennis and the weary police. One of them carried two rifles, which told the wondering people of a death. Two of them supported Si Tuah, which told them a struggle had taken place. Over his features spread a smile as his hands met those of his wife. "'Twas a near thing, Miang," he murmured, "and it happened at the dead of night. A man with a tail and a golden-purple orchid which he worshiped."

From the people rose a gasp of wonder and cries of disbelief. Then Dennis raised his hand.

"Si Tuah speaks the truth," he said, "but Si Urag of the Tail no longer lives, and the flower no more can blossom. The Fear is dead."

Then unsteadily he walked to his house.

WITH *the* COMING *of* DAWN

By LESLIE N. JOHNSON

All was quiet in the death chamber; the guard trod the narrow strip of carpet that ran around the death cell carefully, lest he awaken from his fitful slumbers the figure sprawled in the roll of blankets on the small cot within. From somewhere in the building came the muffled booming of a clock. It was midnight.

Dr. Blaas, convicted murderer, stirred; quickly he jumped to his feet and rushed to the steel bars that separated him from the guard.

"What time is it, guard?" he asked, excitedly.

"Just midnight," the guard answered, noting the bloodless fingers that encircled the bars in a viselike grip.

A relieved expression fell upon the pallid face at the words; the nervous play of facial muscles was momentarily halted, and the man sank into the scarred chair beside the little table.

"Six hours!" he muttered. "Six hours!"

The words died away in a harsh whisper as his head dropped between his outspread arms. Limply he sat there, until the twitching body and

labored breathing told of the tempest of his emotions. With a sudden wild cry, he leapt to his feet, his eyes wide with a maniacal fury.

"They shall not—they *shall* not hang me!" he shouted at the top of his voice. He threw himself against the wooden bars; beat upon them with clenched fists; cried out hoarsely at the futility of it all. Spent, he fell sobbing to the floor, and grew quiet in the arms of blessed unconsciousness.

THE changing of the guard aroused the condemned man.

"What time is it, guard?" he asked, anxiously. He was quiet now, but his face was set with the rigidity of marble and his eyes gleamed with a new light—a light of triumph and fixed purpose.

"Five o'clock."

"It's nearly time," muttered the prisoner. "Guard, may I have a pencil and paper?"

"You may have anything you want, within reason—that's the law," the guard answered as he turned into the little anteroom.

Hastily Dr. Blaas wrote—wrote until his eyes went to the window of the chamber and he beheld the first streaks of the coming dawn. His nerveless fingers relaxed their hold and the pencil clattered on the uncovered table-top as the doctor stared at the breaking day.

"It's daylight!" gasped the prisoner, incredulously, and his eyes fell to the single sentence he had written:

"Rather would I die by my own hand, proclaiming my innocence, than die on the scaffold, and be regarded as guilty."

With a sudden gesture of decision, he turned to the sentry.

"May I have a glass of water?"

As the guard disappeared into the anteroom, Dr. Blaas took hold of the large stone in his ring—the ring the warden, as a last concession, had allowed him to wear into the death cell—unscrewed the top, and, from the cavity under the stone, removed a small white pellet. With the water, he swallowed it.

"I thank you for this last courtesy, guard. I'm going to lie down now. Good-bye."

Silently the guard grasped the slim, cold fingers extended between the bars and turned away with a strange tightening of his throat muscles as the condemned man rolled into his blankets.

THE ringing of the telephone broke the silence of the death chamber—the telephone that was connected with the warden's office. Into the anteroom dashed the guard, to emerge with a happy shout.

"Dr. Blaas, they have granted you a reprieve—you are to have a new trial! Dr. Blaas, wake up!" cried the guard.

The figure on the cot remained quiet and still, and the guard, on entering, found Dr. Blaas beyond the reach of human voice, a ghastly, triumphant smile frozen on his dead lips.

The DEMONS of CASTLE ROMNARE

by Elizabeth Adt Wenzler

"Eugene, seeing in the eery light shed by the shade that the door was held open, stumbled out. He looked fearfully at his surroundings, and tremblingly murmured a prayer of deliverance."

A HUSH of horrified amazement fell upon the village of Saviennes in Lorraine, when it was learned that the demon-haunted Castle Romnare was to have human inmates: Countess Adrienne of Paris had announced that she would give a ball there.

She had been told of the sinister history of the feudal stronghold and the legends, but laughed at everything as idle superstition, and declared in a spirit of sheer bravado that she and her guests would banish the demons.

We shuddered at her daring, and crossed ourselves; for none had yet entered Romnare and come away unscathed.

"None but Romnare blood shall be tolerated within these walls!" the last lord of the domain had sworn—at least, so ran the legend. Near his end and sorely beset by his mortal enemy, he had himself carried to the battlements, to have a last glance at his domain; but here also he had beheld his foe's overwhelming numbers, clamoring at the very gates with shouts of seeming victory.

At this sight, and realizing the plight he was in, his brow grew dark with wrath—this fierce lord who dealt with devils through his knowledge of black magic; and the stubborn pride of Romnare asserted itself. Romnare, which had never asked quarter and never known defeat—Romnare was about to fall. Then had the dying man rallied his ebbing life-forces and sworn a great oath; and by means known only to himself, summoned Lucifer to his aid. Committing his soul to him, he was enabled to evoke

from the earth beneath, the former lords of Romnare, to rise and defend their ancient stronghold. They, forgetting that they had lain moldering for centuries, rose in a vast throng, and were so fierce in their desire for revenge against stranger trespass that their earthly passions were reawakened, and after routing the enemy, they nevermore returned to lasting rest. Nightly they rise, to enact scenes and deeds—part of their earth-life—and their vigil is everlasting.

So ran the legend, and we were shocked at the countess' daring; and when my own brother announced that he had accepted her invitation to assist in the orchestra at the ball, we were stunned with terror.

My mother fell weakly to her knees in her fright; and with ashen face, her voice full of anguish, implored him to cancel his rash promise. "Eugene," she cried, "I pray—reconsider! Give up this mad venture—you can not defy those that reign up there. Remember the drummer of Sarregemuines — his punishment! Think, my boy—they found him wedged in the great porte—neck broken, his eyes showing yet in death the fright of what he had seen. And the other, who came back after two hours up there babbling of things too eery to believe—headless shapes dancing about him! Stay away from that haunt of demons——"

"Demons — pah!" he chided. "Who believes in them, but old ladies and silly girls? There are no such things—they never existed. They are products of disordered minds. Those that went to the castle had their heads filled with tales—and wine spirits. They fell asleep, had dreams, and then came to harm, prompted by their fears. Would you keep me from advancement? The countess will help me to further engagements——"

"Advancement? Will you ever come away?—will you live to be advanced?" my mother pleaded tearfully.

I added my own prayers to hers—for I was his only sister and I loved him deeply; but my prayers had no more effect than my mother's. He was more determined to go than before, and remained by his resolve.

Papa Gaudier of the tavern came expressly on the morning of the ball, to warn him. "Come away before the mists begin to rise," he said. "Be advised by one who has——"

"Ah, Papa Gaudier! *Vin l'Moselle* is heavy—it is that which makes ghosts rise. Papa Gaudier must change to the watery juice of the Rhine."

"Ha! does Mother Tousante drink heavy l'Moselle too—eh, my fledgling? For she says with Gustave Gaudier: remain not when the night-mists rise. Best stay home, little minstrel!" spoke a voice from the doorway.

We turned to behold one whom I well have cause to remember.

"Bonjour, Madame." This to my mother, who had invited her to enter. *"Oui,* it is as Gaudier says. But I, Mother Tousante, have come to say it is not well that your son enter the castle. Beware! Those up there"—she pointed a gnarled hand to where the castle rose on sheer cliffs—"leave them alone. They will not brook trespass." She stopped abruptly and went out.

Eugene had given her a smile of tolerant pity; but I, his sister—I shuddered at her words. For it was whispered that Mother Tousante had strange gifts. She healed old wounds by a few words, murmured low. She told surely if a sufferer would recover, or when the death-bell would toll. Against these remonstrances and our own final warnings, Eugene set off on his errand—untroubled.

We consoled ourselves as best we could with the thought that there was a large body of people gathered at the castle, and vainly awaited his return.

EVENING merged into night, night into day again, but he came not. And all that day we waited and looked from our gable windows, facing the west, from where he must come. But the road stretched toward the hills, empty.

Another evening—night—bringing nothing but despair.

I kept my fears hidden as well as I could from my mother's searching eye. But her restlessness increased every moment. She rushed to the door at the slightest noise, thinking it might be Eugene, that he had returned and was coming in on tiptoe to surprize us, but always she came back and began her torturous watch again.

Friends had come to sit with us, and they said all they could to uphold hope. He might have gone to the inn—he might even now be near home——

Suddenly, a quick footfall was heard in the stillness, coming toward the house. I saw my mother tense visibly as it approached—it was Eugene's! Quick, eager it came, stopping at our house door.

My mother ran out, glad greetings on her lips. The next moment she tottered toward me with a terrible cry, for no living soul was there.

"Oh, God! It is a warning!" she cried wildly. "My son is lost—among the demons! Eugene! Come back, come——"

Her voice went out. She had mercifully fallen into a deep faint. Kind hands took her from my trembling arms, to minister to her comfort.

I stood stunned, unable to move; an eery sensation creeping over me. In a moment I felt withdrawn from my surroundings — projected into space, and saw Eugene playing his violin madly—heard the wail of the last string—saw it snap. I heard his cry of despair as he flung himself against the door of his prison—the castle tower! I heard his call for help, flung into space: "Mignon! Come, help me! Mignon—come—come!" Then silence.

With a shock I came to. Summoned in this manner, I must go to my brother. He was at least alive—waiting to be released. It was for me to find a way.

A way! I thought of Mother Tousante! She, with her strange gifts—she would find a way. If I could only persuade her!

Berthe, our old servant, came to tell me that my mother was better—and weeping quietly.

"Berthe," I spoke as calmly as I could, "now that she is herself, take care of her. I feel as if Eugene was coming, so I will go along the road to meet him. Tell Mother so."

I went out, so that they might not delay me by asking questions. Taking a back road, little used, I reached the outskirts of the village unseen, as was my desire. I had no time to listen to questions and shocked outcries. Instead of taking the chaussee, leading through the valley toward Romnare in a roundabout manner, I ascended to the hills by a primitive footpath, that rises through a narrow gorge to the upper heights.

Boulders and wiry creepers tripped me—hawthorns tore at me with prickly fingers. I stumbled and fell many times, because of these obstacles and the darkness of the gorge; but pressed on again, and at last emerged atop the hills.

Stopping a moment to take breath, I saw Saviennes lying far below, sleepily silent, as lay the farther heights of Romnare. I, with my task, too vast to share with another, seemed the only agitated being in the whole peaceful night. I felt isolated, alien, as I stood there; alien I was to be, indeed, before another day broke. . . .

I flew on again, now on level ground, through a stretch of waving rye fields and open meadows toward Mount Romnare, which loomed for-

biddingly in the distance. My feet faltered as I glanced upward, where the blackened battlements were sharply etched against a dusky summer night; for they seemed to have a peculiarly menacing aspect this night.

Impatiently I recalled myself. Was I to turn coward and leave my Eugene to his fate? Never! I would get to him despite all the demons of Castle Romnare. His life hung in the balance—his sanity. The thought fired me on. I sped over the remaining ground with renewed vigor, to the tiny hamlet at the foot of the cliffs. They would naturally suppose that we of Saviennes craved news.

At the inn I asked about the gay castle affair. Luckily, they knew nothing of my brother's attendance, and the good mistress was ready to impart all she knew. Excitedly she cried:

"Ah, there is no ball at Romnare this night! You saw the castle dark? No music—no laughter—no lights, eh? No indeed! They are all back here—they came screaming last night, begging for shelter. No talk of village louts now—no laughing at superstition. Every cottage has a guest tonight."

I spoke of the countess, hoping to get a clue to the riddle of my brother's trouble.

"Treste! How does *Madame la Comtesse* bear her disappointment?"

"*Horreurs!* You should see her!" Her tone was contemptuous now. "*La belle* Adrienne—*Comtesse piquante,* eh? Faugh—a wretched child, with nerves shattered—she, that laughed! She suffered a shock and the doctor ordered rest for her. La, these Parisians—bah!"

Running on excitedly, she related what the guests had told:

There was a pause in the dancing, while they took refreshments and the servants were lighting the many hundreds of candles that were to illuminate the grand salons and ballroom for the evening. Some stood in groups chatting; when without warning the candles were extinguished by unseen hands. Great shouts were heard to come from the vaults beneath their feet. These became unsteady, from a movement of the parquette, which seemed to heave and buckle upward, as if driven by a terrific subterranean force. Stumbling about in the darkness, unable to escape, all felt a strong wind enter, though the heavy doors remained closed; yet different from wind such as we know, in that it was much colder, and clammy. And it shrieked as with a thousand throats. Suddenly, some were propelled from the room, with the speed of lightning, not knowing how. Others told of being gripped by the throat with icy claws that went deep into their flesh—then felt themselves hurtling through the air, landing upon the flagstones of the courtyard. All received heavy blows over head and shoulders, were slashed about the face, and still showed these marks of bodily chastisement. A woman had gone insane from her fright. She screamed that the evil one himself had carried her through the air—she had seen his claws and wicked fiery eyes; and he dropped her only when she cried a prayer. Some of the guests had already left for Paris.

All this was told in a few minutes. I felt sure now that my brother was the only human being up there. I bade the good woman a pleasant night and made as if to go back to Saviennes, for she stood looking after me. But out of her vision, I turned and ran along the thick shadows of the wild rose hedges, toward a tiny cottage in the fields.

Once more fear assailed me, bringing cold moisture to my brow, as I contemplated the step I meant to take and its consequences. But fiercely I told my coward heart that there was no other way—and Eugene alone up there. . .

PANTING and gasping for breath I reached the little dwelling, crying as I entered, "Mother Tousante! Help me—Eugene—he is among the demons—tell me—what must I do to help——"

I could go no farther. Weakly I fell to a seat.

She sat by the hearth, looking into the flames and crooning to herself. Now she turned quickly and asked. "Ha, child, do you think he lives? Have you seen him—heard——?"

"It is so! I was made to see. He is in the castle tower. I saw him fall against the door of his chamber. Help me pray! How shall I save him?"

"Ah," she muttered, as if to herself; "he, too, is a Romnare. Eugene Romnare—how comes he by that name unless, in bygone times, some ancestor——? But no one tells of that now—he is not of the direct strain. Proof enough that he bears the Romnare name."

Then, as if the firelight had been absorbed into her dark eyes, a reddish gleam came from them as she said slowly, looking into mine: "Child, wilt make a promise? Wilt do as I require? And—wilt keep silence? It is little that I ask. You have two pets—a white pigeon, a black cat. I want them. My raven—my good Jacques—is gone. Dead of old age. I am alone—but for——"

Ooohooo! came a scream from the darkness at the window. My heart contracted. Mother Tousante raised her hand and made a sign against the blackness. The scream was not repeated. Then she turned to me and said, "How, little one? Your promise."

"I promise," I said. I loved my little friends and inwardly mourned their loss, but for the help she alone could give me with her arts, I must sacrifice whatever she asked.

"The pretty trinket, yon broche—wilt part with that? I am but a poor woman—eh?"

The greed in her eyes must be appeased. I gave her the broche.

"A last plea, *cherie*. I know many things. All that I know will you learn this night. But to gain knowledge, we must serve. So you must come when I call of nights—to serve. You shall be like me—have power—see hidden things—mingle at Romnare without harm. You shall free your brother, and those up there may not hinder you. You will come—heed the call, *hein?* To serve?" She knew full well that I must—after this night.

"I will do as you ask, Mother Tousante."

"And you will not tell—never speak of what you will see this night. You have heard—moans—from misshapen ones, that wander in the dark? That is the punishment. Silence is golden—wilt keep it?"

"I will never speak."

She nodded approval. Going to the cupboard, she brought a three-legged pot, containing a dark liquid, which she set into the fire. From the low, beamed ceiling she took sprigs of myrrh, box, and yarrow, adding them to the contents of the pot. On the fire itself she sprinkled frankincense.

Turning to me again she said, "I will now make the chain, to link you with the hidden world. For that I must have your hair. This I take from the center of your head; and as I weave you must repeat the words I speak. Bow!" She bent my head forward and unloosed my hair.

In a few minutes this task was done. She snipped the chain from my head, to tie it about her left wrist, while she continued to chant strange words. A white steam rose from the pot and began to swirl toward me. At this, Mother Tousante dipped a fresh sprig of box into the liquid and began to sprinkle the room. Raising

her voice, she called a name and invocation.

"Come—thou art near! Give sight to this blind one—true sight. Another would enter the silence. Give knowledge, power, friendship. Come—open the circle, for another would serve——"

More quickly swirled the white vapors, enveloping me. There came a muffled roar, and the door flew open. I heard a swish, but saw no one; yet I sensed a Presence close to me. I sat as in a trance.

Suddenly I felt the Presence bend over me and a voice spoke. "By thy will thou enterest the hidden world. One of the silent clan art thou henceforth. I give thee power to summon help from the infinite. For that, I claim thee as my own. I am the Master—thou art mine!"

Away fell the scales from my blind eyes. I beheld him, that had given aid to the last Romnare. . . I sank to my knees—but not with fear. . . He was kind! He raised me!

"Speed on thy way. By yon crossroads, gifts await thee. Will! Thy desire shall be fulfilled."

Swiftly I sped on—not on man-made roads. My feet barely touched the ground; hedges, creepers in the ditches did not hinder me now. Power—I had it, felt it. As by a very whirlwind I was carried toward the mountain.

Suddenly the crossroads—marked by a large stone cross, were before me. I stopped, for here I must prepare for my entrance into the castle, among its inmates.

Summoning all my will-power, I spoke a wish. It was granted—the gift of double sight. Looking about me I saw green flames shoot up by the roadside. Picking the herbs, so marked for me, I stood in the middle of the crossroads and ate them. Facing the mountain, I made my final plea. Oh, my brother! . .

I bent to the ground as I felt compelled, and the transformation took place.

Fierce exultation filled me, and a raucous cry of triumph broke from my throat. I had become, for the time being, the thing feared and shunned by men, which may walk in both worlds—the seen and unseen—yet be of neither.

Eager to set my brother free, I sped on. Again, not on man-made ways, I ascended the mountain through brush, over boulders and narrow ledges; where human foot could not find a hold. Up—straight up—to where my Eugene waited. No fear, no hesitation now. And night was not a time to be afraid in, nor lonely. For it is peopled far more densely than day.

At last I reached the plateau of the mountain. My task was near fulfilment.

DARK and silent lay the castle. But not for long. The great portal was flung wide as I approached, and from the interior streamed the light of many torches.

Boisterous shouts, ribald laughter, sounded from there. Gross shapes, yet human in form, lounged about the heavy board. Heads and tongues lolling, they clamored for more wine, lifting their empty tankards with curses to the scurrying retainers. Women, dressed in costly splendor, swayed laughingly to arms drunkenly held out for them, or skipped away coquettishly, in mock prudery. Debauchery, wantonness, shameless display.

Of the preparations that human hands had made to make Romnare a dwelling place for light hearts, not a trace remained, except a few shreds from flags and garlands, fluttering forlornly on the ground.

Truth spoke the ancient legends of Romnare. Scenes of crimes and executions, forgotten tortures, were enacted before my gaze as I passed

through the courtyard. The death of the minstrel; his murderer, the Black Knight, listening to the black curse spoken by paling lips, and the fulfilment of that curse; the monster, immuring Leonie; again, the rope dangling from his neck, fleeing in mad terror from pursuing specters, red flames of hate breaking from cavernous eyesockets. The block, the ax flashing down on the victim's neck; blood, dried centuries before, spurting again from headless trunks; heads rolling away in the dust, yet uttering vile imprecations against the stronghold and the lords of Romnare.

How truly have they been fulfilled! Forgotten is the glorious past of proud Romnare—gone the days of conquest and victorious tourney. . .

I was led to my brother by a tall, beautiful girl. She, condemned to the tower by her husband whom she had betrayed, had starved to death there. In life she had been far-famed for her grace, and for luring men to destruction. She still works her spells.

As she opened the door to slip in to him, I braced myself against it and so forestalled her attempt to close it. Her eyes glowed redly with baffled rage when she divined my errand, but she had no power to oppose me. Nor could she hold my brother against the wish of him that had sent me. Eugene, seeing in the eery light shed by the shade that the door was held open, stumbled out. I saw him glance fearfully at me and his surroundings, and tremblingly murmur a prayer of deliverance.

My heart ached at his terror; so, to reassure him, I brushed lightly against his hand. But he shrank away in such dread, that I kept from him then. I led him through the courtyard and the throng surrounding us.

Many hands, tapering to sharp points, were stretched forth to crush the life-spark from his body, to be withdrawn because of the shape beside him. So we walked away, united—yet how far apart! . .

At a safe distance from the castle, where the road begins to slope downward, I left my brother, as in his nervous dread he would be better if I were away.

Standing alone, looking at the peaceful valley below, I heard Eugene cry a loud prayer of thanks at his deliverance; and a charm—against me!

I went down speedily where I had come up.

By the crossroads, myself once more, I awaited him. When he came around the bend and saw a form move toward him from the shadow of the cross, he stopped.

I called as I ran to him, "Eugene, beloved! It is I, Mignon, who have waited here for you——"

He came, throwing his arms about me, with a glad cry.

We made our way home as quickly as his weak state allowed. Many were the calls of welcome that greeted us. My mother cried, with joy—Eugene back—sane, unharmed!

But at the wondering questions as to his rescue, he shook his head silently. He ate and retired to much needed rest.

MANY days elapsed before he would speak of his adventure. At last, after much coaxing, he told as follows:

"A pause was called in playing and dancing while refreshments were offered and the candles lit. I went, my violin under my arm, to take a stroll in the courtyard. Suddenly a lady came before me and beckoned, as if she wanted me to accompany her. She led the way to the tower. I followed, thinking her one of the guests, who wished to go to the roof to enjoy the view—but timid of the strange surroundings. Her dress was of a bygone fashion; but as the ladies had donned like costumes for the ball, I

saw nothing amiss. She looked as much a living being as I. We ascended the stairway of the tower, and she, going before me, opened the door and motioned to me to enter with her. I did so and the heavy door clanged shut. I looked for the farther stairway to the roof, but saw to my surprize that we had entered a small chamber with no means of egress except the door by which we had entered. In glancing about, my eyes fell to a pile of white, bleached bones, lying at my feet. Looking at the girl for explanation (we had not spoken yet) I beheld her fading away to nothingness. Too late I realized my mistake. I called loudly for attention, but no one came near me. To keep my reason and hope, I played my violin. I played all night, all day, night again, till the last string broke. I should have gone mad but for that. Many times I called to you. Mother, and Mignon.

"When I had resigned myself to a living grave, the door opened once more. The shade entered and would have closed it again, but for another shape—a terrible thing to see!—that stood holding it open for me to escape. I ran out quickly. I felt sure that the thing that led me away from the castle was friendly. Once it brushed against me, much as if to give me comfort; but I could not bring myself to touch it or speak to it in my aversion. I was glad when it left me by the roadside, to disappear into the night.

"Gladder yet was I when I found Mignon waiting for me by the cross. But I wish to forget——"

Forget he could not. Not ill in body was Eugene. But I saw what none did, not even he; his heart withered away. I, too, had seen the beautiful, evil shade.

Fallen under the spell of the phantom woman, my brother sought and welcomed death. My mother, heartbroken, followed soon. . .

MANY times have I gone, once I knew my power and impunity, to linger with those that rise with the night mists. Much have I learned. All the secrets of feudal Romnare are known to me—all its crimes. I have tarried with the ladies dwelling there in the days when Romnare blood flowed hot and flared quickly; the days when the throw of jeweled dice was life or death. I have heard their life-stories, told in faint, tinkling voices, wafted to me across the span of many centuries. Fierce loves, abysmal hates have they shown me; and why they can not rest. Beautiful goblets of carved gold are borne about by slender hands up there. Thirsty homecomers, taking deep drafts of the sparkling contents, "To Life and Love," would sink to eternal sleep; so making room for beloved rivals. Finely wrought daggers have I seen, carried in the wide sleeves of brocaded gowns, against moments of opportunity. Hidden doors that keep ghastly secrets well. . .

I have gone far to overcome the lure of Romnare; of nights, when my unrest was too great I have written this—for relief.

In Lorraine they speak of the castle as formerly, with this added: how the gay Countess Adrienne became a silent inmate of the Carmelite convent near Saviennes; and how Eugene Romnare was rescued from the demons of Castle Romnare by a large black werewolf.

THE HOUSE OF HORROR

by SEABURY QUINN

"Look!" he commanded. "Those eyes—grand Dieu, those eyes!"

"*MORBLEU,* Friend Trowbridge, have a care," Jules de Grandin warned as my lurching motor car almost ran into the brimming ditch beside the rain-soaked road.

I wrenched the steering wheel viciously and swore softly under my breath as I leaned forward, striving vainly to pierce the curtains of rain which shut us in.

"No use, old fellow," I confessed, turning to my companion, "we're lost; that's all there is to it."

"Ha," he laughed shortly, "do you just begin to discover that fact, my friend? *Parbleu,* I have known it this last half-hour."

Throttling my engine down, I crept along the concrete roadway, peering through my streaming windshield and storm curtains for some familiar landmark, but nothing but blackness, wet and impenetrable, met my eyes.

Two hours before, answering an insistent 'phone call, de Grandin and I had left the security of my warm office to administer a dose of toxin antitoxin to an Italian laborer's child who lay, choking with diphtheria, in a hut at the workmen's settlement where the new branch of the railroad was being put through. The cold, driving rain and the Stygian darkness of the night had misled me when I made the detour around the railway cut, and for the past hour and a half I had been feeling my way over unfamiliar roads as futilely as a lost child wandering in the woods.

"*Grâce à Dieu,*" de Grandin exclaimed, seizing my arm with both his small, strong hands, "a light! See, there it shines in the night. Come, let us go to it. Even the meanest hovel is preferable to this so villainous rain."

I peeped through a joint in the curtains and saw a faint, intermittent

light flickering through the driving rain some two hundred yards away.

"All right," I acquiesced, climbing from the car, "we've lost so much time already we probably couldn't do anything for the Vivianti child, and maybe these people can put us on the right road, anyway."

Plunging through puddles like miniature lakes, soaked by the wind-driven rain, barking our shins again and again on invisible obstacles, we made for the light, finally drawing up to a large, square house of red brick fronted by an imposing white-pillared porch. Light streamed out through the fanlight over the white door and from the two tall windows flanking the portal.

"*Parbleu*, a house of circumstance, this," de Grandin commented, mounting the porch and banging lustily at the polished brass knocker.

I wrinkled my forehead in thought while he rattled the knocker a second time. "Strange, I can't remember this place," I muttered. "I thought I knew every building within thirty miles, but this is a new one——"

"Ah bah!" de Grandin interrupted. "Always you must be casting a wet blanket on the parade, Friend Trowbridge. First you insist on losing us in the midst of a *sacré* rainstorm, then when I, Jules de Grandin, find us a shelter from the weather, you must needs waste time in wondering why it is you know not the place. *Morbleu*, you will refuse shelter because you have never been presented to the master of the house, if I do not watch you, I fear."

"But I ought to know the place, de Grandin," I protested. "It's certainly imposing enough to——"

My defense was cut short by the sharp click of a lock, and the wide, white door swung inward before us.

We strode over the threshold, removing our dripping hats as we did so, and turned to address the person who had opened the door.

"Why——" I began, and stared about me in open-mouthed surprize.

"Name of a little blue man!" said Jules de Grandin, and added his incredulous stare to mine.

As far as we could see, we were alone in the mansion's imposing hall. Straight before us, perhaps for forty feet, ran a corridor of parquetry flooring, covered here and there by rich-hued Oriental rugs. White-paneled walls, adorned with oil paintings of imposing-looking individuals, rose for eighteen feet or so to a beautifully frescoed ceiling, and a graceful, curving staircase swept upward from the farther end of the room. Candles in cut glass sconces lighted the high-ceiled apartment, the hospitable glow from a log fire burning under the high white marble mantel lent an air of homely coziness to the place, but of anything living, human or animal, there was no faintest trace or sign.

Click! Behind us, the heavy outer door swung to silently on well-oiled hinges and the automatic lock latched firmly.

"Death of my life!" de Grandin murmured, reaching for the door's silver-plated knob and giving it a vigorous twist. "*Par la moustache du diable*, Friend Trowbridge, it is locked! Truly, perhaps it had been better if we had remained outside in the rain!"

"Not at all, I assure you, my dear sir," a rich, mellow voice answered him from the curve of the stairs. "Your arrival was nothing less than providential, gentlemen."

Coming toward us, walking heavily with the aid of a stout cane, was an unusually handsome man attired in pajamas and dressing gown, a sort of nightcap of flowered silk on his white head, slippers of softest Morocco on his feet.

"You are a physician, sir?" he asked, glancing inquiringly at the medicine case in my hand.

"Yes," I answered. "I am Dr. Samuel Trowbridge, from Harrisonville, and this is Dr. Jules de Grandin, of Paris, who is my guest."

"Ah," replied our host, "I am very, very glad to welcome you to Marston Hall, gentlemen. It so happens that one—er—my daughter, is quite ill, and I have been unable to obtain medical aid for her on account of my infirmities and the lack of a telephone. If I may trespass on your charity to attend my poor child, I shall be delighted to have you as my guests for the night. If you will lay aside your coats"—he paused expectantly. "Ah, thank you"—as we hung our dripping garments over a chair—"you will come this way, please?"

We followed him up the broad stairs and down an upper corridor to a tastefully furnished chamber where a young girl—fifteen years of age, perhaps—lay propped up with a pile of diminutive pillows.

"Anabel, Anabel, my love, here are two doctors to see you," the old gentleman called softly.

The girl moved her fair head with a weary, peevish motion and whimpered softly in her sleep, but gave no further recognition of our presence.

"And what have been her symptoms, if you please, *Monsieur?*" de Grandin asked as he rolled back the cuffs of his jacket and prepared to make an examination.

"Sleep," replied our host, "just sleep. Some time ago she suffered from influenza, lately she has been given to fits of protracted slumber from which I can not waken her. I fear she may have contracted sleeping sickness, sir. I am told it sometimes follows influenza."

"H'm." De Grandin passed his small, pliable hands rapidly over the girl's cheeks in the region of the ears, felt rapidly along her neck over the jugular vein, then raised a puzzled glance to me. "Have you some laudanum and aconite in your bag, Friend Trowbridge?" he asked.

"There's some morphine," I answered, "and aconite; but no laudanum."

"No matter," he waved his hand impatiently, bustling over to the medicine case and extracting two small phials from it. "No matter, this will do as well. Some water, if you please, *Monsieur,*" he turned to the father, a medicine bottle in each hand.

"But, de Grandin"—I began, when a sudden kick from one of his slender, heavily-shod feet nearly broke my shin—"de Grandin, do you think that's the proper medication?" I finished lamely.

"Oh, *mais oui,* undoubtedly," he replied. "Nothing else would do in this case. Water, if you please, *Monsieur,*" he repeated, again addressing the father.

I stared at him in ill-disguised amazement as he extracted a pellet from each of the bottles and quickly ground them to powder while the old gentleman filled a tumbler with water from the porcelain pitcher which stood on the chintz-draped wash-stand in the corner of the chamber. He was as familiar with the arrangement of my medicine case as I was, I knew, and knew that my phials were arranged by numbers instead of being labeled. Deliberately, I saw, he had passed over the morphine and aconite, and had chosen two bottles of plain, unmedicated sugar of milk pills. What his object was I had no idea, but I watched him measure out four teaspoonfuls of water, dissolve the powder in it, and pour the sham medication down the unconscious girl's throat.

"Good," he proclaimed as he washed the glass with meticulous care. "She will rest easily until the morn-

ing, *Monsieur*. When daylight comes we shall decide on further treatment. Will you now permit that we retire?" He bowed politely to the master of the house, who returned his courtesy and led us to a comfortably furnished room farther down the corridor.

"SEE here, de Grandin," I demanded when our host had wished us a pleasant good-night and closed the door upon us, "what was your idea in giving that child an impotent dose like that——?"

"S-s-sh!" he cut me short with a fierce whisper. "That young girl, *mon ami*, is no more suffering from encephalitis than you or I. There is no characteristic swelling of the face or neck, no diagnostic hardening of the jugular vein. Her temperature was a bit subnormal, it is true—but upon her breath I detected the odor of chloral hydrate. For some reason, good I hope, but bad I fear, she is drugged, and I thought it best to play the fool and pretend I believed the man's statements. *Pardieu*, the fool who knows himself no fool has an immense advantage over the fool who believes him one, my friend."

"But——"

"But me no buts. Friend Trowbridge; remember how the door of this house opened with none to touch it, recall how it closed behind us in the same way, and observe this, if you will." Stepping softly, he crossed the room, pulled aside the chintz curtains at the window and tapped lightly on the frame which held the thick plate glass panes. "*Regardez vous*," he ordered, tapping the frame a second time.

Like every other window I had seen in the house, this one was of the casement type, small panes of heavy glass being sunk into latticelike frames. Under de Grandin's directions I tapped the latter, and found them not painted wood, as I had supposed, but stoutly welded and bolted metal. Also, to my surprize, I found the turnbuckles for opening the casement were only dummies, the metal frames being actually securely bolted to the stone sills. To all intents, we were as firmly incarcerated as though serving a sentence in the state penitentiary.

"The door——" I began, but he shook his head.

Obeying his gesture, I crossed the room and turned the handle lightly. It twisted under the pressure of my fingers, but, though we had heard no warning click of lock or bolt, the door itself was as firmly fastened as though nailed shut.

"Wh—why," I asked stupidly, "what's it all mean, de Grandin?"

"*Je ne sais quoi*," he answered with a shrug, "but one thing I know: I like not this house, Friend Trowbridge. I——"

Above the hissing of the rain against the windows and the howl of the sea-wind about the gables, there suddenly rose a scream, wire-edged with inarticulate terror, freighted with utter, transcendental anguish of body and soul.

"*Cordieu!*" He threw up his head like a hound hearing the call of the pack from far away. "Did you hear it, too, Friend Trowbridge?"

"Of course," I answered, every nerve in my body trembling in horripilation with the echo of the hopeless wail.

"*Pardieu*," he repeated, "I like this house less than ever, now! Come, let us move this dresser before our door. It is safer that we sleep behind barricades this night, I think."

We blocked the door, and I was soon sound asleep.

"TROWBRIDGE, Trowbridge, my friend"—de Grandin drove a sharp elbow into my ribs—"wake up, I beseech you. Name of a green goat, you lie like one dead, save for your so abominable snoring!"

"Eh?" I answered sleepily, thrusting myself deeper beneath the voluminous bedclothes. Despite the unusual occurrences of the night I was tired to the point of exhaustion, and fairly drunk with sleep.

"Up; arise, my friend," he ordered, shaking me excitedly. "The coast is clear, I think, and it is high time we did some exploring."

"Rats!" I scoffed, disinclined to leave my comfortable couch. "What's the use of wandering about a strange house to gratify a few unfounded suspicions? The girl might have been given a dose of chloral hydrate, but the chances are her father thought he was helping her when he gave it. As for these trick devices for opening and locking doors, the old man apparently lives here alone and has installed these mechanical aids to lessen his work. He has to hobble around with a cane, you know."

"Ah!" my companion assented sarcastically. "And that scream we heard, did he install that as an aid to his infirmities, also?"

"Perhaps the girl woke up with a nightmare," I hazarded, but he made an impatient gesture.

"Perhaps the moon is composed of green cheese, also," he replied. "Up, up and dress; my friend. This house should be investigated while yet there is time. Attend me: But five minutes ago, through this very window, I did observe *Monsieur* our host, attired in a raincoat, depart from his own front door, and without his cane. *Parbleu*, he did skip as agilely as any boy, I assure you. Even now he is almost at the spot where we abandoned your automobile. What he intends doing there I know not. What I intend doing I know full well. Do you accompany me or not?"

"Oh, I suppose so," I agreed, crawling from the bed and slipping into my clothes. "How are you going to get past that locked door?"

He flashed me one of his sudden smiles, shooting the points of his little blond mustache upward like the horns of an inverted crescent. "Observe," he ordered, displaying a short length of thin wire. "In the days when woman's hair was still her crowning glory, what mighty deeds a lady could encompass with a hairpin! *Pardieu*, there was one little grisette in Paris who showed me some tricks in the days before the war! Regard me, if you please."

Deftly he thrust the pliable loop of wire into the keyhole, twisting it tentatively back and forth, at length pulling it out and regarding it carefully. "*Très bien*," he muttered as he reached into an inside pocket, bringing out a heavier bit of wire.

"See," he displayed the finer wire, "with this I take an impression of that lock's tumblers, now"—quickly he bent the heavier wire to conform to the waved outline of the lighter loop—"*voilà*, I have a key!"

And he had. The lock gave readily to the pressure of his improvised key, and we stood in the long, dark hall, staring about us half curiously, half fearfully.

"This way, if you please," de Grandin ordered; "first we will look in upon *la jeunesse*, to see how it goes with her."

We walked on tiptoe down the corridor, entered the chamber where the girl lay, and approached the bed.

She was lying with her hands folded upon her breast in the manner of those composed for their final rest, her wide, periwinkle-blue eyes staring sightlessly before her, the short, tightly curled ringlets of her blond, bobbed hair surrounding her drawn, pallid face like a golden nimbus encircling the ivory features of a saint in some carved ikon.

My companion approached the bed softly, placing one hand on the girl's wrist with professional precision. "Temperature low, pulse weak," he

murmured, checking off her symptoms. "Complexion pale to the point of lividity,—ha, now for the eyes; sleeping, her pupils should have been contracted, while they should now be dilate—*Dieu de Dieu!* Trowbridge, my friend, come here.

"Look," he commanded, pointing to the apathetic girl's face. "Those eyes—*grand Dieu,* those eyes! It is sacrilege, nothing less."

I looked into the girl's face, then started back with a half-suppressed cry of horror. Asleep, as she had been when we first saw her, the child had been pretty to the point of loveliness. Her features were small and regular, clean-cut as those of a face in a cameo, the tendrils of her light-yellow hair had lent her a dainty, ethereal charm comparable to that of a Dresden china shepherdess. It had needed but the raising of her delicate, long-lashed eyelids to give her face the animation of some laughing sprite playing truant from fairyland.

Her lids were raised now, but the eyes they unveiled were no clear, joyous windows of a tranquil soul. Rather, they were the peepholes of a spirit in torment. The irides were a lovely shade of blue, it is true, but the optics themselves were things of horror. Rolling grotesquely to right and left, they peered futilely in opposite directions, lending to her sweet, pale face the half-ludicrous, wholly hideous expression of a bloating frog.

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, turning from the deformed girl with a feeling of disgust akin to nausea; "What a terrible affliction!"

De Grandin made no reply, but bent over the girl's still form, gazing intently at her malformed eyes. "It is not natural," he announced. "The muscles have been tampered with, and tampered with by someone who is a master hand at surgery. Will you get me your syringe and some strychnin, Friend Trowbridge? This poor one is still unconscious."

I hastened to our bedroom and returned with the hypodermic and stimulant, then stood beside him, watching eagerly, as he administered a strong injection.

The girl's narrow chest fluttered as the powerful drug took effect, and the pale lids dropped for a second over her repulsive eyes. Then, with a sob which was half moan, she attempted to raise herself on her elbow, fell back again, and, with apparent effort, gasped, "The mirror, let me have the mirror! Oh, tell me it isn't true; tell me it was a trick of some sort. Oh, the horrible thing I saw in the glass couldn't have been I. Was it?"

"*Tiens, ma petite,*" de Grandin replied, "but you speak in riddles. What is it you would know?"

"He—he"—the girl faltered weakly, forcing her trembling lips to frame the words—"that horrible old man showed me a mirror a little while ago and said the face in it was mine. Oh, it was horrible, horrible!"

"Eh? What is this?" de Grandin demanded on a rising note. "'He'? 'Horrible old man'? Are you not his daughter? Is he not your father?"

"No," the girl gasped, so low her denial was scarcely audible. "I was driving home from Mackettsdale last —oh, I forget when it was, but it was at night—and my tires punctured. I —I think there must have been glass on the road, for the shoes were cut to ribbons. I saw the light in this house and came to ask for help. An old man—oh, I thought he was so nice and kind!—let me in and said he was all alone here and about to eat dinner, and asked me to join him. I ate some —some—oh, I don't remember what it was—and the next thing I knew he was standing by my bed, holding a mirror up to me and telling me it was my face I saw in the glass. Oh, please, *please,* tell me it was some terrible

trick he played on me. I'm not truly hideous, am I?"

"*Morbleu!*" de Grandin muttered softly, tugging at the ends of his mustache. "What is all this?"

To the girl he said: "But of course not. You are like a flower, *Mademoiselle.* A little flower that dances in the wind. You——"

"And my eyes, they aren't—they aren't"—she interrupted with piteous eagerness—"please tell me they aren't——"

"*Mais non, ma chère,*" he assured her. "Your eyes are like the *pervenche* that mirrors the sky in springtime. They are——"

"Let—let me see the mirror, please," she interrupted in an anxious whisper. "I'd like to see for myself, if you—oh, I feel all weak inside——" She lapsed back against the pillow, her lids mercifully veiling the hideously distorted eyes and restoring her face to tranquil beauty.

"*Cordieu!*" de Grandin breathed. "The chloral re-asserted itself none too soon for Jules de Grandin's comfort, Friend Trowbridge. Sooner would I have gone to the rack than have shown that pitiful child her face in a mirror."

"But what's it all mean?" I asked. "She says she came here, and——"

"And the rest remains for us to find out, I think," he replied evenly. "Come, we lose time, and to lose time is to be caught, my friend."

De Grandin led the way down the hall, peering eagerly into each door we passed in search of the owner's chamber, but before his quest was satisfied he stopped abruptly at the head of the stairs. "Observe, Friend Trowbridge," he ordered, pointing a carefully manicured forefinger to a pair of buttons, one white, one black, set in the wall. "Unless I am more mistaken than I think I am, we have here the key to the situation—or at least to the front door."

He pushed vigorously at the white button, then ran to the curve of the stairs to note the result.

Sure enough, the heavy door swung open on its hinges of cast bronze, letting gusts of rain drive into the lower hall.

"*Pardieu,*" he ejaculated, "we have here the open sesame; let us see if we possess the closing secret as well! Press the black button, Trowbridge, my friend, while I watch."

I did his bidding, and a delighted exclamation told me the door had closed.

"Now what?" I asked, joining him on the stairway.

"U'm," he pulled first one, then the other end of his diminutive mustache meditatively; "the house possesses its attractions, Friend Trowbridge, but I believe it would be well if we went out to observe what our friend, *le vieillard horrible,* does. I like not to have one who shows young girls their disfigured faces in mirrors near our conveyance."

Slipping into our raincoats we opened the door, taking care to place a wad of paper on the sill to prevent its closing tightly enough to latch, and scurried out into the storm.

As we left the shelter of the porch a shaft of indistinct light shone through the rain, as my car was swung from the highway and headed toward a depression to the left of the house.

"*Parbleu,* he is a thief, this one!" de Grandin exclaimed excitedly. "*Hola, Monsieur!*" He ran forward, swinging his arms like a pair of semaphores. "What sort of business is it you make with our *moteur?*"

The wailing of the storm tore the words from his lips and hurled them away, but the little Frenchman was not to be thwarted. "*Pardieu,*" he gasped, bending his head against the wind-driven rain, "I will stop the

scoundrel if—*nom d'un coq,* he has done it!"

Even as he spoke the old man flung open the car's forward door and leaped, allowing the machine to go crashing down a low, steep embankment into a lake of slimy swamp-mud.

For a moment the vandal stood contemplating his work, then burst into a peal of wild laughter more malignant than any profanity.

"*Parbleu,* robber, *Apache!* you shall laugh from the other side of your mouth!" de Grandin promised, as he made for the old man.

But the other seemed oblivious of our presence. Still chuckling at his work, he turned toward the house, stopped short as a sudden heavy gust of wind shook the trees along the roadway, then started forward with a yell of terror as a great branch, torn bodily from a towering oak tree came crashing toward the earth.

He might as well have attempted to dodge a meteorite. Like an arrow from the bow of divine justice, the great timber hurtled down, pinning his frail body to the ground like a worm beneath a laborer's brogan.

"Trowbridge, my friend," de Grandin announced matter-of-factly, "observe the evil effects of stealing motor cars."

We lifted the heavy bough from the prostrate man and turned him over on his back. De Grandin on one side, I on the other, we made a hasty examination, arriving at the same finding simultaneously. His spinal column was snapped like a pipestem.

"You have some last statement to make, *Monsieur?*" de Grandin asked curtly. "If so, you had best be about it, your time is short."

"Y—yes," the stricken man replied weakly. "I—I meant to kill you, for you might have hit upon my secret. As it is, you may publish it to the world, that all may know what it meant to offend a Marston. In my room you will find the documents. My—my pets—are—in—the—cellar. She—was—to—have—been—one—of—them." The pauses between his words became longer and longer, his voice grew weaker with each labored syllable. As he whispered the last sentence painfully there was a gurgling sound, and a tiny stream of blood welled up at the corner of his mouth. His narrow chest rose and fell once with a convulsive movement, then his jaw dropped limply. He was dead.

"Oh ho," de Grandin remarked, "it is a hemorrhage which finished him. A broken rib piercing his lung. U'm? I should have guessed it. Come, my friend, let us carry him to the house, then see what it was he meant by that talk of documents and pets. A pest upon the fellow for dying with his riddle half explained! Did he not know that Jules de Grandin can not resist the challenge of a riddle? *Parbleu,* we will solve this mystery, *Monsieur le Mort,* if we have to hold an autopsy to do so!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, hush, de Grandin," I besought, shocked at his heartlessness. "The man is dead."

"Ah bah!" he returned scornfully. "Dead or not, did he not steal your motor car?"

We laid our gruesome burden on the hall couch and mounted the stairs to the second floor. With de Grandin in the lead we found the dead man's room and began a systematic search for the papers he had mentioned, almost with his last breath. After some time my companion unearthed a thick, leather-bound portfolio from the lower drawer of a beautiful old mahogany highboy, and spread its wide leaves open on the white-counterpaned bed.

"Ah," he drew forth several papers and held them to the light, "we begin to make the progress, Friend Trowbridge. What is this?"

He held out a newspaper clipping

cracked from long folding and yellowed with age. It read:

Actress Jilts Surgeon's Crippled Son on Eve of Wedding

Declaring she could not stand the sight of his deformity, and that she had engaged herself to him only in a moment of thoughtless pity, Dora Lee, well-known variety actress, last night repudiated her promise to marry John Biersfield Marston, Jr., hopelessly crippled son of Dr. John Biersfield Marston, the well-known surgeon and expert osteologist. Neither the abandoned bridegroom nor his father could be seen by reporters from the *Planet* last night.

"Very good," de Grandin nodded, "we need go no farther with that account. A young woman, it would seem, once broke her promise to marry a cripple, and, judging from this paper's date, that was in 1896. Here is another, what do you make of it?"

The clipping he handed me read as follows:

Surgeon's Son a Suicide

Still sitting in the wheel-chair from which he has not moved during his waking hours since he was hopelessly crippled while playing polo in England ten years ago, John Biersfield Marston, son of the famous surgeon of the same name, was found in his bedroom this morning by his valet. A rubber hose was connected with a gas jet, the other end being held in the young man's mouth.

Young Marston was jilted by Dora Lee, well-known vaudeville actress, on the day before the date set for their wedding, one month ago. He is reported to have been extremely low-spirited since his desertion by his fiancée.

Dr. Marston, the bereaved father, when seen by reporters from the *Planet* this morning, declared the actress was responsible for his son's death and announced his intention of holding her accountable. When asked if legal proceedings were contemplated, he declined further information.

"So?" de Grandin nodded shortly. "Now this one, if you please."

The third clipping was brief to the point of curtness:

Well-known Surgeon Retires

Dr. John Biersfield Marston, widely known throughout this section of the country as an expert in operations concerning the bones, has announced his intention of retiring from practise. His house has been sold, and he will move from the city.

"The record is clear so far," de Grandin asserted, studying the first clipping with raised eyebrows, "but —*morbleu,* my friend, look, look at this picture. This Dora Lee, of whom does she remind you? Eh?"

I took the clipping again and looked intently at the illustration of the article announcing young Marston's broken engagement. The woman in the picture was young and inclined to be overdressed in the voluminous, fluffy mode of the days before the Spanish-American War.

"Um, no one whom I know——" I began, but halted abruptly as a sudden likeness struck me. Despite the towering pompadour arrangement of her blond hair and the unbecoming straw sailor hat above the coiffure, the woman in the picture bore a certain resemblance to the disfigured girl we had seen a half-hour before.

The Frenchman saw recognition dawn in my face, and nodded agreement. "But of course," he said. "Now, the question is, is this young girl whose eyes are so out of alinement a relative of this Dora Lee, or is the resemblance a coincidence, and if so, what lies behind it? *Hein?*"

"I don't know," I admitted, "but there must be some connection——"

"Connection? Of course there is a connection," de Grandin affirmed, rummaging deeper in the portfolio. "A-a-ah! What is this? *Nom d'un nom,* Friend Trowbridge, I think I smell the daylight! Look!"

He held a full-page story from one of the sensational New York dailies before him, his eyes glued to the flowing type and crude, coarse-screened half-tones of half a dozen young women which composed the article.

"WHAT HAS BECOME OF THE MISSING GIRLS?" I read in bold-faced type across the top of the page.

"Are sinister, unseen hands reaching out from the darkness to seize our girls from palace and hovel, shop, stage and office?" the article asked rhetorically. "Where are Ellen Munro and Dorothy Sawyer and Phyllis Bouchet and three other lovely, light-haired girls who have walked into oblivion during the past year?"

I read to the end the sensational account of the girls' disappearances. The cases seemed fairly similar; each of the vanished young women had failed to return to her home and had never been accounted for in any manner, and in no instance, according to the newspaper, had there been any assignable reason for voluntary departure.

"*Parbleu,* but he was stupid, even for a journalist!" de Grandin asserted as I completed my inspection of the story. "Why, I wager even my good Friend Trowbridge has already noticed one important fact which this writer has treated as though it were as commonplace as the nose on his face."

"Sorry to disappoint you, old chap," I answered, "but it looks to me as though the reporter had covered the case from every possible angle."

"Ah? So?" he replied sarcastically. "*Morbleu,* we shall have to consult the oculist in your behalf when we return home, my friend. Look, look, I beseech you, upon the pictures of these so totally absent and unaccounted for young women, *cher ami,* and tell me if you do not observe a certain likeness among them, not only a resemblance to each other, but to that Mademoiselle Lee who jilted the son of Dr. Marston? Can you see it, now I have pointed it out?"

"No — wh — why, yes, — yes, of course!" I responded, running my eye over the pictures accompanying the story. "By the Lord Harry, de Grandin, you're right; you might almost say there is a family resemblance between these girls! You've put your finger on it, I do believe."

"*Hélas,* no!" he answered with a shrug. "I have put my finger on nothing as yet, my friend. I reach, I grope, I feel about me like a blind man tormented by a crowd of naughty little boys, but nothing do the poor fingers of my mind encounter. Pah! Jules de Grandin, you are one great fool! Think, think, stupid one!"

He seated himself on the edge of the bed, cupping his face in his hands and leaning forward till his elbows rested on his knees.

Suddenly he sprang erect, one of his elfish smiles passing across his small, regular features. "*Nom d'un chat rouge,* my friend, I have it—I have it!" he announced. "The pets —the pets that old stealer of motor cars spoke of! They are in the basement! *Pardieu,* we will see those pets, *cher* Trowbridge; with our four collective eyes we will see them. Did not that so execrable stealer declare she was to have been one of them? Now, in the name of Satan and brimstone, whom could he have meant by 'she' if not that unfortunate child with eyes like *la grenouille?* Eh?"

"Why——" I began, but he waved me forward.

"Come, come; let us go," he urged. "I am impatient, I am restless, I am not to be restrained. We shall investigate and see for ourselves what sort of pets are kept by one who shows young girls their deformed faces in mirrors and—*parbleu!*—steals motor cars from my friends."

Hurrying down the main stairway, we hunted about for the cellar entrance, finally located the door and, holding above our heads a pair of candles from the hall, began descending a flight of rickety steps into a pitch-black basement, rock-walled and, judging by its damp, moldy odor, unfloored save by the bare, moist earth beneath the house.

"*Parbleu*, the dungeons of the château at Carcassonne are more cheerful than this," de Grandin commented as he paused at the stairs' foot, holding his candle aloft to make a better inspection of the dismal place.

I suppressed a shudder of mingled chill and apprehension as I stared at the blank stone walls, unpierced by windows or other openings of any sort, and made ready to retrace my steps. "Nothing here," I announced. "You can see that with half an eye. The place is as empty as——"

"Perhaps, Friend Trowbridge," he agreed, "but Jules de Grandin does not look with half an eye. He uses both eyes, and uses them more than once if his first glance does not prove sufficient. Behold that bit of wood on the earth yonder. What do you make of it?"

"U'm—a piece of flooring, maybe," I hazarded.

"Maybe yes, maybe no," he answered. "Let us see."

Crossing the cellar, he bent above the planks, then turned to me with a satisfied smile. "Flooring does not ordinarily have ring-bolts in it, my friend," he remarked, bending to seize the iron ring which was made fast to the boards by a stout staple.

"Ha!" As he heaved upward the planks came away from the black earth, disclosing a board-lined well about three feet square and of uncertain depth. An almost vertical ladder of two-by-four timbers led downward from the trap-door to the well's impenetrable blackness.

"*Allons*, we descend," he commented, turning about and setting his foot on the topmost rung of the ladder.

"Don't be a fool," I advised. "You don't know what's down there."

"True"—his head was level with the floor as he answered—"but I shall know, with luck, in a few moments. Do you come?"

I sighed with vexation as I prepared to follow him.

At the ladder's foot he paused, raising his candle and looking about inquiringly. Directly before us was a passageway through the earth, ceiled with heavy planks and shored up with timbers like the lateral workings of a primitive mine.

"Ah, the plot shows complications," he murmured, stepping briskly into the dark tunnel. "Do you come, Friend Trowbridge?"

I followed, wondering what manner of thing might be at the end of the black, musty passage, but nothing but fungus-grown timbers and walls of moist, black earth met my questing gaze.

De Grandin preceded me by some paces, and, I suppose, we had gone fifteen feet through the passage when a gasp of mingled surprize and horror from my companion brought me beside him in two long strides. Fastened with nails to the timbers at each side of the tunnel were a number of white, glistening objects, objects which, because of their very familiarity, denied their identity to my wondering eyes. There was no mistaking the things: even a layman could not have failed to recognize them for what they were. I, as a physician, knew them even better. To the right of the passage hung fourteen perfectly articulated skeletons of human legs, complete from foot to ilium, gleaming white and ghostly in the flickering light of the candles.

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed.

"*Sang du diable!*" Jules de Grandin commented. "Behold what is there, my friend," he pointed to the opposite wall. Fourteen bony arms, complete from hand to shoulder-joint, hung pendulously from the tunnel's upright timbers.

"*Pardieu*," de Grandin muttered,

"I have known men who collected stuffed birds and dried insects; I have known those who stored away Egyptian mummies—even the skulls of men long dead—but never before have I seen a collection of arms and legs! *Parbleu*, he was *caduc*—mad as a hatter, this one, or I am much mistaken!"

"So these were his pets?" I answered. "Yes, the man was undoubtedly mad to keep such a collection, and in a place like this. Poor fellow——"

"Nom d'un canon!" de Grandin broke in; "what was that?"

From the darkness before us there came a queer, inarticulate sound, such as a man might make attempting to speak with a mouth half-filled with food, and, as though the noise had wakened an echo slumbering in the cavern, the sound was repeated, multiplied again and again till it resembled the babbling of half a dozen overgrown infants—or an equal number of full-grown imbeciles.

"Onward!" Responding to the challenge of the unknown like a warrior obeying the trumpet's call to charge, de Grandin dashed toward the strange noise, swung about, flashing his candle this side and that, then:

"Nom de Dieu de nom de Dieu!" he almost shrieked. "Look, Friend Trowbridge, look and say that you see what I see, or have I, too, gone mad?"

Lined up against the wall was a series of seven small wooden boxes, each with a door composed of upright slats before it, similar in construction to the coops in which country folk pen brooding hens—and no larger. In each of the hutches huddled an object the like of which I had never before seen, even in the terrors of nightmare.

The things had the torsos of human beings, though hideously shrunken from starvation and incrusted with scales of filth, but there all resemblance to mankind ceased. From shoulders and waist there twisted flaccid tentacles of unsupported flesh, the upper ones terminating in flat, paddlelike flippers which had some remote resemblance to hands, the lower ones ending in almost shapeless stubs which resembled feet only in that each had a fringe of five shriveled, unsupported protuberances of withered flesh.

On scrawny necks were balanced caricatures of faces, flat, noseless, chinless countenances with horrible crossed or divergent eyes, mouths widened almost beyond resemblance to buccal orifices, and—horror of horrors!—elongated, *split* tongues protruding several inches from the lips and wagging impotently in vain efforts to form words.

"Satan, thou art outdone!" de Grandin cried as he held his candle before a scrap of paper decorating one of the cages after the manner of a sign before an animal's den at the zoo. "Observe!" he ordered, pointing a shaking finger at the notice.

I looked, then recoiled, sick with horror. The paper bore the picture and name of Ellen Munro, one of the girls mentioned as missing in the newspaper article we had found in the dead man's bedroom.

Beneath the photograph was scribbled in an irregular hand: "Paid 1-25-97."

Sick at heart we walked down the line of pens. Each was labeled with the picture of a young and pretty girl with the notation, "Paid," followed by a date. Every girl named as missing in the newspaper was represented in the cages.

Last of all, in a coop somewhat smaller than the rest, we found a body more terribly mutilated than any. This was marked with the photograph and name of Dora Lee. Beneath her name was the date of her

"payment," written in bold red figures.

"*Parbleu*, what are we to do, my friend?" de Grandin asked in an hysterical whisper. "We can not return these poor ones to the world, that would be the worst form of cruelty; yet—yet I shrink from the act of mercy I know they would ask me to perform if they could speak."

"Let's go up," I begged. "We must think this thing over, de Grandin, and if I stay here any longer I shall faint."

"*Bien*," he agreed, and turned to follow me from the cavern of horrors.

"It is to consider," he began as we reached the upper hall once more. "If we give those so pitiful ones the stroke of mercy we are murderers before the law, yet what service could we render them by bringing them once more into the world? Our choice is a hard one, my friend."

I nodded.

"*Morbleu*, but he was clever, that one," the Frenchman continued, half to me, half to himself. "What a surgeon! Fourteen instances of Wyeth's amputation of the hip and as many more of the shoulder—and every patient lived, lived to suffer the tortures of that hell-hole down there! But it is marvelous! None but a madman could have done it.

"Bethink you, Friend Trowbridge. Think how the mighty man of medicine brooded over the suicide of his crippled son, meditating hatred and vengeance for the heartless woman who had jilted him. Then—snap! went his great mentality, and from hating one woman he fell to hating all, to plotting vengeance against the many for the sin of the one. And, *cordieu*, what a vengeance! How he must have laid his plans to secure his victims; how he must have worked to prepare that hell-under-the-earth to house those poor, broken bodies which were his handiwork, and how he must have drawn upon the great surgical skill which was his, even in his madness, to transform those once lovely ones into the visions of horror we have just beheld! Horror of horrors! To remove the bones and let the girls still live!"

He rose, pacing impatiently across the hall. "What to do? What to do?" he demanded, striking his open hands against his forehead.

I followed his nervous steps with my eyes, but my brain was too numbed by the hideous things I had just seen to be able to respond to his question.

I looked hopelessly past him at the angle of the wall by the great fireplace, rubbed my eyes and looked again. Slowly, but surely, the wall was declining from the perpendicular.

"De Grandin," I shouted, glad of some new phenomenon to command my thoughts, "the wall—the wall's leaning!"

"Eh, the wall?" he queried. "*Pardieu*, yes! It is the rain; the foundations are undermined. Quick, quick, my friend! To the cellars, or those unfortunate ones are undone!"

We scrambled down the stairs leading to the basement, but already the earth floor was sopping with water. The well leading to the madman's subcellar was more than half full of bubbling, earthy ooze.

"Mary, have pity!" de Grandin exclaimed. "Like rats in a trap, they did die. God rest their tired souls"—he shrugged his shoulders as he turned to retrace his steps—"it is better so. Now, Friend Trowbridge, do you hasten aloft and bring down that young girl from the room above. We must run for it if we do not wish to be crushed under the falling timbers of this house of abominations!"

The storm had spent itself and a red, springtime sun was peeping over the horizon as de Grandin and I trudged up my front steps with the mutilated girl stumbling wearily between us.

"Put her to bed, my excellent one," de Grandin ordered Nora, my housekeeper, who came to meet us enveloped in righteous indignation and an outing flannel nightgown. "*Parbleu*, she has had many troubles!"

In the study, a glass of steaming whisky and hot water in one hand, a vile-smelling French cigarette in the other, he faced me across the desk. "How was it you knew not that house, my friend?" he demanded.

I grinned sheepishly. "I took the wrong turning at the detour," I explained, "and got on the Yerbysville Road. It's just recently been hard-surfaced, and I haven't used it for years because it was always impassable. Thinking we were on the Andover Pike all the while, I never connected the place with the old Olmsted Mansion I'd seen hundreds of times from the road."

"Ah, yes," he agreed, nodding thoughtfully, "a little turn from the right way, and—pouf!—what a distance we have to retrace."

"Now, about the girl upstairs," I began, but he waved the question aside.

"The mad one had but begun his devil's work on her," he replied. "I, Jules de Grandin, will operate on her eyes and make them as straight as before, nor will I accept one penny for my work. Meantime, we must find her kindred and notify them she is safe and in good hands.

"And now"—he handed me his empty tumbler — "a little more whisky, if you please, Friend Trowbridge."

Watch for the next adventure of Jules de Grandin—"Ancient Fires," by Seabury Quinn. This is a fascinating tale of wandering gipsies, haunted houses, ghostly apparitions, Hindoo charms and eery thrills. It will be published soon in WEIRD TALES

The DREAMER of ATLÂNAAT

by E. Hoffmann Price

"With a hoarse, strangled yell, Isfendiyar leaped forward, wrenching himself from his vision. The simitar flamed wide and swiftly."

ISMAIL the chief wazir sat at the foot of his master's dais, reading from the chronicles of that great prince, the adornment of Islam, who had reigned magnificently in far-off Balkh nine hundred years ago.

"A horse and a robe of honor for Giaffar al Barmaki, the Grand Wazir, the friend of the Calif, 40,000 dinars of gold."

And then a few lines farther down was another entry, dated several days later: "Reeds and naphtha for burning the body of the traitor Giaffar, four dirhems of silver."

And Ismail smiled; for as it was then, so could it be today: nine hundred years were but as a mist that obscured, rather than a hand that changed. Ismail smiled, and again read to himself of the swift fate that befell the friend of that just prince, nine hundred years ago in Balkh . . . a horse and a robe of honor . . . naphtha and reeds. . . Yes, and Haaj Isfendiyar, was he not the friend of the sultan, and the enemy of Ismail?

Giaffar al Barmaki, friend of the just calif, had had an enemy. . .

After ten years of high adventure, ten years of intrigue and device, Haaj Isfendiyar was able to pause for a moment's respite, look back over the turbulent days of his ascent from obscurity, and contemplate the world from the shadow of the sultan's favor. And as he sat there in the guardroom of the palace of Angor-lana, a little apart from his subordinates, as became the friend of the sultan and captain of a thousand horse, he relaxed long enough to stroke his curled black beard and feast himself on reminiscence.

Ten years . . . ten years ago it was that a lean, hard-eyed young fellow

with a nose like the beak of a bird of prey had sought audience of the sultan; sought, and gained audience, ragged and grimy as he was.

"And where did you get that sword?" queried the sultan, eyeing the glittering scabbard and belt and embroidered pouch that were so out of keeping with the ragged garments and the unwashed wanderer whose erect form they inclosed.

"I inherited them from an emir in Kurdistan," replied the youth, returning the sultan's stare, "along with his horse and other belongings."

"So! You lie as readily as you plundered . . . though perhaps you did inherit as a self-appointed heir . . . well, not bad at all; you should attain a high post at court. By the way, do you speak Persian?"

"No, my lord. But there are Persian verses on the blade of my simitar."

And to prove it, he unsheathed the weapon: a serious breach of etiquette, this drawing of arms in the sultan's presence, and at times a fatal error. The fan-bearers behind the throne ceased fanning long enough to watch the bungler's head roll across the tiled floor. But the sultan smiled, and the youth's head remained on his shoulders.

"Very good." Then, to the captain of the guard, "Nourredin, here is a recruit for you. Instruct him, and at sunset post him at El Azir. And learn to speak Persian, young fellow!"

Again the son of the old tiger of Angor-lana smiled. And so likewise did the captain, and also the fan-bearers. This, then, was the sultan's gentle, jesting way of disposing of one so ignorant of court etiquette as to draw a weapon in the Presence!

At noon the next day, when the captain and his men rode to inspect the outposts, they saw vultures hovering high over El Azir. But upon drawing nearer, they saw that the wanderer still rode his beat; still on post, but mounted on a different horse, a silver-white stallion of the princely desert breed.

Between the vultures and the jackals, the bones of the recruit's assailants had become hopelessly intermingled.

And from that day on, the wanderer's rise was rapid.

Thinking of all this, Haaj Isfendiyar smiled, and stroked his curled beard, and contemplated the world from the shadow of the sultan's favor. And then he nodded gravely to the wazir Ismail, his enemy, whose approach interrupted his play of reminiscence.

"*Es salaam aleika!*" he greeted.

"And with you, exceeding peace, Haaji," returned the wazir. "My horse is in your stables, and the arms we wagered on the race have been left at your house. And here is the purse we agreed upon," concluded Ismail, offering a heavy pouch, completing the payment of a ruinous wager.

"Which leaves you even as I was ten years ago, save that I had arms and a horse, inherited from an emir. The gold I will keep; but go back and take your goods, and your horse also."

"You are generous as Hatim Tai," acknowledged Ismail.

"It is nothing," countered Isfendiyar.

For, serene in the shadow of the sultan's friendship, he forgot for an instant that magnanimity adds to instead of detracting from enmity, forgot that the poet had counseled, "Yield naught to your foe, were he Rustum, the son of Zal. . ."

"You have a trick, Haaji, of inheriting arms and horses. May I examine that poniard?" requested Ismail.

"And why not?"

"A remarkable weapon, Haaji. Doubtless it has not mate, but is truly matchless?"

"It had a mate. But I lost it several years ago. And then I had my name inlaid on the blade of the remaining one."

"Wondrous workmanship," commented Ismail, returning the weapon.

Isfendiyar had poured himself a glass of Shirazi, twisted his mustache, and thought fondly of the emir whose heir he was. And thus it was that he did not note that the poniard which he received from Ismail was not the one bearing his own name, Isfendiyar, but rather its long-lost mate, identical to the line, save only that its blade was not engraved.

LATE that evening, the wazir Ismail sought the sultan, who had just completed his plans for the next day's administration.

"My lord, do not walk in the gardens tonight, as is your custom."

"And why not?"

"There is one who will seek you with a knife."

The wazir handed the sultan a sheet of paper.

"I found this note of warning among the petitions given me to submit to you at today's audience. As you will note, it is anonymous; but there may be truth in it. I withheld it, for I did not wish to distract you before the day's work was done."

"And so you would have me hide because someone threatens?"

"I was about to suggest that my lord permit me to act as a decoy, for we are of the same stature. And some members of the guard could await in concealment, so that we could trap the assassin."

"And have it known that I hide in my house and fear to walk in my own gardens?" flared the sultan. "Nonsense! I will go at the usual hour!"

"But——"

"Enough! You may leave."

And Ismail departed, knowing well that further argument with the hot-headed prince would be wasted.

"Reeds and naphtha, four dirhems of silver," he murmured to himself, as he left the Presence.

The sultan divested himself of his outer garment, donned a shirt of fine-linked mail, proof alike against pistol or knife, and then, once more dressed, he scrutinized the fine Persian script of the warning note.

"If this is indeed in good faith, I shall meet and settle once for all with whoever seeks me tonight; and if it is a hoax," reasoned the sultan, "then at least the writer shall not have the satisfaction of saying that a son of the old tiger kept to his house like a frightened child."

He smiled sourly, unfolded and reread the letter. From the city wall came the challenge of a sentry as he halted the new relief. It was time for the sultan's promenade, time to meet the assassin.

ONCE out in the garden, the hunted prince strolled as was his custom, with the nonchalance, the careless bearing of a monarch who seeks a moment's respite from the cares of state. Careless indeed he seemed as he flicked his cigarette into the pool of a fountain that sprayed mistily in the moonlight, paused to examine a small plane-tree, planted with his own hands; but beneath this pose of relaxation were the tense nerves of him who stalks the tiger.

"A hoax, no doubt . . . and if I ever find the perpetrator, Saoud will spend the rest of the day wiping up spilled blood. Still——"

There was a snap of steel tested beyond its endurance. The sultan pitched forward a step, recovered, whirled, drew his pistol, and fired at the nude, oiled form of his assailant, who was just clearing the garden wall. But moonlight and the swiftly

moving target proved too much for the sultan's marksmanship. The would-be assassin made good his escape.

The sultan shrugged his bruised shoulder.

"Well, but that was real enough."

And then at his feet he saw the poniard which, meeting the tough shirt of mail, had snapped at the hilt, Picking up the pieces, the sultan sought the private apartments of his palace. From a great distance came the thump-thump of atabals, the pulsing of drums that spoke of revolt in the hills.

"Treason within and revolt without! Bah!" He spat disgustedly. "And to think that I left the joys of Feringhistan to inherit this house of madness! Fool that I was to decline the offer of that infidel who would have bought my entire kingdom . . . an expensive coffin."

And thus and thus soliloquized the sultan as he picked his way through the dark corridors of his palace, and up the winding stairs to the roof. There, in the full light of the moon he scrutinized the shattered weapon the assassin had dropped in his flight.

"Marvelous good taste," he reflected, noting the adamantine splendor of the diamond-encrusted pommel, and the cool, unblinking blue of Burmese sapphires on the hilt. "A pity it had to break. . . Allah! Am I utterly mad?" he gasped.

"Isfendiyar, the son of Mamoun," he read in letters of gold inlay on the blade.

The sultan's features became drawn and haggard. His shoulders drooped. With head bowed, he paced back and forth, seeking to collect his scattered wits.

"You, Isfendiyar, my good friend . . . accursed be friendship and all friends! . . you, Isfendiyar, the son of Mamoun, you seek my life because that fierce old man my father saw fit to jest, and doomed your father to death!"

And below, in the courtyard of the palace, from time to time the watch was changed; and now and then from the hills came the sinister drumming that spoke of revolt. But of all this the sultan was unaware; unaware of all save that Isfendiyar, his good friend, was indeed the son of that Mamoun of the great house of Idris, whom the old sultan had sent to his doom; and that for all these years Isfendiyar had plotted vengeance, failing only on account of an anonymous warning.

On all this the sultan pondered, admitting the justice of Isfendiyar's claim. Why should not one of the noble race of Idris seek just reprisal? And then came the memory of their friendship, and the bread they had broken, and the salt with which it had been seasoned.

The false dawn glowed on the horizon. And still the sultan paced to and fro, torn by conflicting thoughts of vengeance, pardon, wrath, and regret. An hour passed, and the true dawn flared forth. Still the sultan was entangled in his indecision.

The muezzin in the high minaret of the mosque intoned his call to prayer; and to its cadence the sultan chanted his oath of vengeance.

"You, Isfendiyar, my friend who sought me with a dagger, holding me accountable for the evil deed of my father. . ."

And then it dawned upon him that it was too late for reprisal; for surely the would-be assassin had ridden that very night back into the desert whence he came ten years ago. Inconsistently enough, the sultan rejoiced that the shock of the night's encounter and subsequent discovery had so benumbed his usually active brain that he had let Isfendiyar make good his escape.

"*Bismillahi rrahhmani rrahheem* ——" he began, as he faced the east. "Praise be to God, lord of the worlds. . ."

THAT morning in the hall of audience the wazir Ismail noted the sultan's hard features and knew without asking that there had been a meeting in the garden.

"My lord," he announced, "Haaj Isfendiyar seeks audience with you."

"Impossible!" And then, to himself, "Fool! Why didn't he ride last night? . . and now——"

"Then my lord will not see him?" Ismail wilfully misinterpreted.

"Bring him in."

And the sultan tapped a small gong with the mallet hanging on its pedestal. Four black mamelukes, fully armed, entered and took their posts at each side of the throne. Following them came Saoud the executioner with his great simitar.

"And to you, a thousand years, Haaj Isfendiyar," returned the sultan to his friend's greeting. "They tell me," continued the prince, smilingly, "that you inherited much of your property from an emir."

"Even so, my lord," replied Isfendiyar, wondering that at such an early hour there would be jests concerning inheritances.

"And among those articles was a poniard which you had inscribed with your name?"

"Even so."

"This, for example, which you dropped in the gardens last night, after failing to leave it between my ribs. . . . Seeking to inherit a throne this time, Haaji?"

The sultan in his extended hand displayed the fragments of the weapon.

"My lord jests."

But Isfendiyar knew that doom lurked behind the fast-fading smile and in the smoldering eyes of the sultan.

"Jest? I wish I did. Saoud! Isa! Ibrahim! Hussein! Said!"

The sultan struck his hands sharply together as he snapped out the names of his mamelukes.

The blacks advanced, seizing the astonished Isfendiyar.

"This is what remains of your poniard, which broke against my shirt of mail. You did not foresee that, did you, friend Isfendiyar?"

"Here in my belt is my poniard. Draw it and see," Isfendiyar commanded the mamelukes.

"Here is your poniard," countered the sultan, again displaying the pieces, "and it bears your inscription. This blade which you now offer me is blank. You have overstepped yourself once too often in your trick of inheriting things; and you armed yourself with the wrong blade. Isfendiyar, I admire the nerve which made you stay here to try again, instead of riding back into the desert. For who would have suspected? . . . But your judgment was faulty, and your head will pay."

"*Allah akbar!*" murmured Isfendiyar, seeing the hopeless odds, seeing that even his voluntary presence at court that morning had been construed against him, seeing that neither wit nor reason could extricate him from the trap. The evidence was damning; Ismail had won.

Saoud sought the sultan's eye. His fingers closed on the hilt of his blade.

"Isfendiyar, you were once my friend. Therefore shall I give you your choice of death in whatever form your fancy demands."

"Then let me die in single combat with Ismail, on horse or on foot, as he may elect."

"Crafty and plotting to the last! With your last move you would dispose of an enemy. But you know full well that you could not die in any combat with him. Therefore

choose . . . Isfendiyar, why did you make that mad attempt? Why seek me with a knife—me, your friend? Was it my fault that my fierce old father sent your father to his death? Why, I did not even know that Mamoun had a son. . . No, Isfendiyar, I shall spare your life; but I shall banish you, and give your house to be plundered."

And at the sultan's gesture of dismissal, the mamelukes escorted Isfendiyar to the eastern gate, stripped of his rank, once again a wanderer. His house was even then being pillaged by the rabble; and his horses were being led to the sultan's stables. Of all his fortune there remained but a purse of dinars, and that rare simitar which men called the Ladder to Heaven, on account of the transverse markings an ancient smith had forged into damascened steel.

"The Ladder to Heaven and a bit of gold. And I have had less even than that as a start," reflected Isfendiyar, thinking of a meeting with a Kurdish emir ten years ago.

WELL without the city walls, Isfendiyar sat down in the shade of a tree at the cross-roads, pondering on his next move. Into the hills to lead the revolt against the sultan? And why not? Why not lift the Ladder to Heaven against that prince who had exiled him on suspicion, that prince whose father had sent the father of Isfendiyar to his doom for the sake of a Kashmiri bayadere?

"But he spared my life, when he could have taken it . . . spared, in order to pillage, and send into exile a faithful friend and servant." And thus, each thought contradicting its predecessor, Isfendiyar sought to resolve the riddle of the situation.

Weary at last, and drowsy from the heat, Isfendiyar fell half asleep, and restlessly dreamed of seeking new fortunes, reprisal against the tyrant who had had so little faith in him, and vengeance for the sake of Mamoun, his father whom the sultan's father had sent to his death.

Isfendiyar awoke with a start. It was late in the afternoon.

"Alms, in the name of Allah, alms!" whined a voice at his side.

"Beggars begging from a beggar!"

Isfendiyar tossed the ragged old mendicant a coin, recklessly flung him a dinar of gold.

"My lord is generous, and I am grateful. I will repair my lord's fortunes."

"And what do you know of my fortunes?"

"Who does not know what befell Haaj Isfendiyar? But I am old and wise, and you can profit by my wisdom."

"And regain my position by following the counsel of a beggar?"

"Beggar? Look!"

The old man flipped the alms of Isfendiyar into the dusty highway.

The whine had vanished from his voice; his keen, hard eyes regarded Haaj Isfendiyar intently, commandingly. Though ragged, disreputable, with grimy talons and matted beard, this old man who tossed a gold piece aside as so much dirt was surely no beggar.

"What then, old man?" queried Isfendiyar, amazed at such a reckless gesture. "And who are you to know so much about sultans and those who seek them with daggers? Perhaps you could even tell me who found my poniard and used it so clumsily. But who are you?"

"I am Ismeddin the darvish, whom Allah has favored with wisdom beyond that of other men; and I know strange devices wherewith to recoup one's fortune. And I know that your thoughts are of vengeance; that you regret you did not make the attempt whereof you are accused, knowing full well that you would not have bungled."

"Well then, Ismeddin, since gold does not interest you, I shall save it for one who will need it. But what do you want?" he continued, as he retrieved the coin and thrust it into his purse. "My influence at court? For men do not offer favors without seeking something in return."

"What have I to do with courts? Or with gold? I am a simple darvish who for the sake of doing a good deed would help you gain revenge and repair your fortunes."

"By finding the lost gardens of Irem, or going to El Moghreb to raise a force to reconquer Spain?" scoffed Isfendiyar, half out of patience, yet interested in the old man's fancies.

"No, Haaji. Follow me," commanded the darvish.

And Isfendiyar, once captain of a thousand horse, followed, and wondered that he did so. True, he had no place to go, no plans in mind save to go to El Moghreb, or perhaps to seek a friend in Azerbaijan; and one is never in a hurry about beginning such long trips. But to follow this ragged old man . . . unheard of! Yet he followed.

SOMEWHAT over an hour's walk brought them to the edge of a sparse jungle, lost in whose depths were the ruins of an ancient city. A most unsavory locality, one whereof strange tales had been told. Against men he could use the Ladder to Heaven; but against afreet and djinni . . . well, that was another matter entirely. And that old man's eyes glittered strangely. Isfendiyar halted.

"Haaji, do you know who I am?" questioned the darvish, likewise halting.

"Ismeddin the darvish, if you spoke the truth."

"Who is the Lord of the World?" queried the darvish quite irrelevantly.

"There is no god but Allah, and Mahmet is his prophet," intoned Isfendiyar, as he placed his fingertips first on his temples, then on his lips, then, crossing his arms on his breast, made his salaam.

"Wrong, Haaji! Were that the truth, would you, an innocent man, be accused of attempting to assassinate your master, and be punished for the crime of another?"

"Iblis fly away with him!"

"A detail to be arranged in due course. But as I have said, you have been wronged, and you shall have ample recompense and great vengeance. This very evening you shall stand before the Lord of the World."

"The Lord of the World? If not Allah, then——" Isfendiyar shuddered, retreated a pace, and whispered, "Malik Taûs?"

"No. Not the Lord Peacock, but rather him whose idle fancy created not only Allah, but all the gods before whom men have bowed. And you shall not leave me until you have heard me to a finish," commanded the darvish.

Isfendiyar approached a step, drawn by a compulsion that overcame his fear. Sweat glistened on his forehead. His fingers trembled as they curled around the hilt of the Ladder to Heaven.

"There is no god but——"

"Enough! And you need not finger your sword. I am your friend, the darvish Ismeddin; more your friend than you can possibly know. You will see strange things tonight, Haaji. And you shall have all the vengeance that you desire. If you are a man of courage, follow me."

The sun had set. Into the jungle the darvish led Haaj Isfendiyar, somewhat reassured, yet withal uneasy and consumed with apprehension. That glittering uncanny eye, that compelling voice, those sinister words. . . .

The jungle became denser; progress slower. Darkness, swift on the trail of sunset, fell and enveloped them. Ismeddin picked his way, following a path he must have known by instinct, so sure was his advance. Isfendiyar was guided but by the dirty white blotch of the old man's *djellab*. At last they halted at a breach in a wall that towered high above them.

"The ancient citadel of Atlânaat," announced the darvish with the lordly gesture of one who puts on exhibition some prized bit of personal property.

Isfendiyar trembled violently, despite his efforts to compose himself. That fiend-haunted ruin could bring him no good. He recollected tales of those who had sought the treasure said to be buried in its depths. Some few had returned; but those few had been stark mad and raving, and babbled of monstrous things they had heard and seen. And this old man spoke with such a proprietary air concerning the place!

The moon had risen, revealing a vast extent of shattered columns, broad avenues, and ruined buildings of colossal proportions. Grotesque figures leered at him from the strangely carven capitals of gigantic pillars; unhallowed sculptures writhed and twisted on the walls.

The darvish busied himself with gathering dead wood from just outside the walls, leaving Isfendiyar to make what he could out of the sinister surroundings. Then with a flint and steel he struck light, kindling a small fire at the entrance of the shrine before which they had halted.

"The hour is not at hand. Let us rest."

From his pouch he drew dates and cakes of millet which he offered Isfendiyar.

"Eat."

"I am not hungry," protested Isfendiyar, recollecting the strange sayings of the darvish.

"Nonsense!" snorted the darvish. "You have not eaten since this morning. Eat, and fear nothing. I am your friend."

When Isfendiyar had disposed of the last of the food, the darvish drew from his voluminous pouch several dried plums, dark, shriveled, and scarcely larger than olives.

"These, Haaji, were plucked from a tree that grows on the slopes of Mount Kaf. Eat three of them, for they will give you the courage you will need to face that which is before you."

Isfendiyar eyed the plums, but made no move to accept.

"See, I myself will eat one, whichever one you leave."

But Isfendiyar did not note that the darvish palmed the remaining plum instead of eating it.

Strangely flavored were those small plums: bitter-sweet, and pungent, and aromatic of spices, a mêlée of conflicting flavors curiously blended. Isfendiyar could not say just what they did resemble; certainly nothing the like of which he had ever before tasted. He nibbled a second plum. Why not? What if they were poison? What odds? The ten best years of his life had been swept away by the unjust suspicions of a capricious prince. And all the while the old man regarded him with that fixed, intent, glittering eye.

"While we wait, Haaji, we shall have music."

So saying, the darvish drew from that same pouch a tiny *darabukeh*, a small drum whose body of dark wood was laid off in seventeen oddly carved sectors. Its head was made of skin the like of which Isfendiyar had never seen.

"It is the tanned hide of an unjust prince," replied the old man to

Isfendiyar's question. "Flayed by his outraged subjects, ages ago. Abaddon has played on this drum in the depths of his black pit. And now listen to the tunes that *I* shall sound on it."

Squatting directly in front of Isfendiyar, the darvish began to play, tapping with his fingers on that tiny drum; with fingertips and knuckles and with the heel of his hand coaxing from it a reverbration of amazing volume. And as he played, in shifting, varying rhythms, he chanted in a language that Isfendiyar had not heard for ten years.

The old man paused in his playing for an instant and tossed into the embers of the fire a handful of powder which fumed heavily, so that through its mist Isfendiyar could see but the glittering, intent eye of the darvish. He ate the third plum, sucking from its seed the very last bit of spicy flavor. He nodded drowsily to the marching pulse of that tiny *darabukeh*, and to the strange words of the darvish, words that sang of vengeance, and flickering blades, and swiftly looping silken bowstrings, and of the Lord of the World who dreamed, and whose every dream was tangible fact. The dense, acrid, pungent-sweetness of the incense half strangled Isfendiyar; and the flavor of the last plum tingled on his tongue.

"The hour is almost at hand, Haaji," crooned the old man, "the hour of reprisal draws near . . . and you shall stand before the Lord of the World who dreams that which we see as things as they are . . . and he shall rebuild your fate as it should be . . . and you shall see those things whereof I have told you. Arise, Haaji, for the hour is here, and we have had enough music . . . and have but one more plum, Haaji. . ."

Isfendiyar arose as might some colossus arise from the dais of stone which it had occupied for a thousand years. His pulse throbbed in cadence to the subtly shifting pulse of the *darabukeh;* and his mouth still tingled with the aromatic bitter-sweetness of those dried plums. He followed the darvish into the ruined shrine, and down a stairway into a subterranean vault where screened torches cast a flickering, indirect illumination upon its curved walls and cinnabar-sprinkled floor.

In the center of the vault was a dais whereon sat an old man, asleep, or in deep meditation. His head was bowed; his eyes were half closed; his white beard trailed to his waist; and between his hands he held a great globe of crystal in whose depths played and shifted the flickering torchlight.

"Haaj Isfendiyar," purred the darvish, "you are now before the Dreamer of Atlânaat, the Lord of the World, he who built this mighty citadel the day that he completed the creation of the world. He sleeps, and sleeping, dreams, and all things that seem to be are but figments of his dream; and those things whereof he ceases to dream, at that instant cease to be."

And to all this Isfendiyar agreed; and of all things in the world this seemed the most logical, that the visions of that Dreamer should at the instant of dreaming become fact made absolute.

As he spoke, the darvish extended his arms and with passes of his long-nailed talons he stroked the forehead of Isfendiyar; then stepping to his left side, with his knuckles he rapped sharply here and there along his spine, and with rapid movements passed over his body, pausing to knead this muscle and that. And all the while he crooned in his purring monotone; and all the while Isfendiyar acquiesced to the strange things whereof the darvish sang, and with

each stroke and pass seemed to be drawn from his body, so that he could stand beside it and watch it, even unto the stare of his own fixed eyes.

"All this is but a dream, and we are but one of the Dreamer's fancies. And were he but to awake, we and all things else would vanish and become as nothing, and less than nothing. So that he must not awake, ever . . . but I shall whisper in his ear that which I wish him to dream, that which when made manifest will give you ample vengeance and high fortune. . . Now gaze into that crystal into which he gazes, and think on your vengeance, and I shall play my drum, so that he will dream that which, as it is dreamed, becomes truth, and fact accomplished. . ."

The tiny *darabukeh*, spurred to life by the fluttering fingertips and thumping knuckles of the darvish, rolled, and purred, and reverberated in its maddening rhythm. The flavor of those dried plums still lingered in the mouth of Isfendiyar. His senses reeled, and swam, so that it seemed that he floated in a perfumed sea; erect, and on his feet, but floating, with waves of poison-sweetness warmly lapping his cheeks. The crystal became clouded, then opalescent, then clouded again. A murmuring filled his ears, the murmuring of many voices chanting from afar, and the thump-thump of drums that spoke of blood, and flickering blades, and the slowly flapping pinions of vultures.

The clouds parted; and there, before him, Isfendiyar saw the sultan walking in the gardens by moonlight, strolling as was his custom by fountains and among rose trees. And then from the shadows emerged a figure moving stealthily, and bearing a drawn poniard which shimmered icily. . .

Isfendiyar exulted at the vengeance to come; identified himself with the dark form of the avenger. Surely it was himself that he saw, dagger in hand. And all that which the Dreamer dreamed was at that instant to be made truth, and a fact accomplished. The dark figure approached the sultan; the blade rose. . .

With a hoarse, strangled yell, Isfendiyar leaped forward, wrenching himself from his vision. The Ladder to Heaven flamed wide and swiftly. The head of the Dreamer rolled at his feet on the cinnabar-powdered floor.

Isfendiyar fled from that fiend-haunted vault, taking the steps four at a leap. Once above ground, he ran down the wide avenue, simitar still clutched in his hand, frenzy staring from his eyes.

The fragment of a shattered column interrupted his flight. He sprawled flat in the street, his blade ringing as it struck the paving.

"Why this haste, Isfendiyar?" queried a calm voice at his side. "Were the sights not to your taste?"

Staggering to his feet, Isfendiyar saw the sultan himself confronting him. He picked up the Ladder to Heaven, stared the prince full in the eye, then flung his simitar to the paving.

"Now mock me for saving you from the Dreamer and his dream!"

He reeled and would have fallen but for the sultan's supporting arm.

"I know well what you saw in the crystal, Haaji, for I heard the words of the old darvish who had drugged you with plums laden with hasheesh, and chanted your senses away with his mumming words and his thumping drum. Vengeance you sought; yet when you saw me about to be slain, you ended the Dreamer's dream."

Then, to the darvish, who had emerged from the vault, "Well, Ismeddin, are you through with your jugglery? Name your reward, for

you have served me well in vindicating my faithful Isfendiyar."

The darvish laughed.

"Well, and I have served myself also. And this I demand: that you restore Isfendiyar my grandson to favor."

"Your grandson?"

"Yes. For while as Ismeddin the darvish I have often come from the desert to advise and help you, I am also Ismeddin el Idrisi, and the father of that Mamoun whom your father sent to his death for the sake of a dancing girl. And now I return to the desert to meditate on the folly of serving princes. But I bear you no ill will for the sake of that fierce old man your father. If you need me again, seek me as before. A thousand years!"

And the old man vanished in the darkness of the ruins.

The drugged, addled brain of Isfendiyar had cleared itself of the hypnotic thump of drums, the juggling words of the darvish, and the poison-sweetness of those strange plums.

"My lord, who was that Dreamer whose head I sheared off? Or was there really a Dreamer?"

"Oh, that was your friend Ismail. Circumstances were against you, damningly so; for even your presence at court was in keeping with your shrewdness and audacity. But after having passed sentence, it occurred to me that the attempt on my life had been made for some purpose other than that of slaying me: for a true assassin would instinctively have kept his weapon, or even the remainder of it, in his grasp. Its being dropped was the first false note. And in the light of reflection, that warning note was the second error: I know you well enough to know that had you really designed my death, no one would have been able to warn me, for you always play a lone hand. Last of all, Ismail seemed too elated when he announced your presence this morning, and too disappointed when he heard the sentence. So I summoned Ismeddin, and later, invited Ismail to drink with me. Then, drugged, and adorned with a patriarchal beard, I sent him to this place to pose as Dreamer. Thus in the end he was killed by that very fidelity he had impeached."

"But suppose the strange tricks of Ismeddin had failed, and I had not struck?"

"I knew that when your grandfather proposed that test he was sure of himself and his strange powers. Well, and now to horse!" exclaimed the sultan as a groom approached.

And the wazir Isfendiyar rode back to Angor-lana at the right of his friend the sultan.

FEAR

By CRISTEL HASTINGS

Fear stalks by stealth at night when all is still,
When shadows creep and crawl and grow until
The darkness grips my heart with ghostly ease
And makes the very wind that sighs in trees
The icy breath of monsters poised to leap
And tear my trembling heart out while I sleep.

WEIRD STORY REPRINTS

No. 13. The Birthmark

By NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

IN THE latter part of the last century there lived a man of science, an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy, who not long before our story opens had made experience of a spiritual affinity more attractive than any chemical one. He had left his laboratory to the care of an assistant, cleared his fine countenance from the furnace smoke, washed the stain of acids from his fingers, and persuaded a beautiful woman to become his wife. In those days, when the comparatively recent discovery of electricity and other kindred mysteries of Nature seemed to open paths into the region of miracle, it was not unusual for the love of science to rival the love of woman in its depth and absorbing energy. The higher intellect, the imagination, the spirit, and even the heart might all find their congenial aliment in pursuits which, as some of their ardent votaries believed, would ascend from one step of powerful intelligence to another, until the philosopher should lay his hand on the secret of creative force and perhaps make new worlds for himself. We know not whether Aylmer possessed this degree of faith in man's ultimate control over Nature. He had devoted himself, however, too unreservedly to scientific studies ever to be weaned from them by any second passion. His love for his young wife might prove the stronger of the two; but it could only be by intertwining itself with his love of science and uniting the strength of the latter to his own.

Such a union accordingly took place, and was attended with truly remarkable consequences and a deeply impressive moral. One day, very soon after their marriage, Aylmer sat gazing at his wife with a trouble in his countenance that grew stronger until he spoke.

"Georgiana," said he, "has it never occurred to you that the mark upon your cheek might be removed?"

"No, indeed," said she, smiling; but, perceiving the seriousness of his manner, she blushed deeply. "To tell you the truth, it has been so often called a charm that I was simple enough to imagine it might be so."

"Ah, upon another face perhaps it might," replied her husband; "but never on yours. No, dearest Georgiana, you came so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature that this slightest possible defect, which we hesitate whether to term a defect or a beauty, shocks me, as being the visible mark of earthly imperfection."

"Shocks you, my husband!" cried Georgiana, deeply hurt; at first reddening with momentary anger, but then bursting into tears. "Then why did you take me from my mother's side? You can not love what shocks you!"

To explain this conversation, it must be mentioned that in the center of Georgiana's left cheek there was a singular mark, deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance of her face. In the usual state of her complexion—a healthy though delicate bloom—the mark wore a tint

of deeper crimson, which imperfectly defined its shape amid the surrounding rosiness. When she blushed it gradually became more indistinct, and finally vanished amid the triumphant rush of blood that bathed the whole cheek with its brilliant glow. But if any shifting motion caused her to turn pale there was the mark again, a crimson stain upon the snow, in what Aylmer sometimes deemed an almost fearful distinctness. Its shape bore not a little similarity to the human hand, though of the smallest pigmy size. Georgiana's lovers were wont to say that some fairy at her birth hour had laid her tiny hand upon the infant's cheek, and left this impress there in token of the magic endowments that were to give her such sway over all hearts. Many a desperate swain would have risked life for the privilege of pressing his lips to the mysterious hand. It must not be concealed, however, that the impression wrought by this fairy sign manual varied exceedingly according to the difference of temperament in the beholders. Some fastidious persons—but they were exclusively of her own sex—affirmed that the bloody hand, as they chose to call it, quite destroyed the effect of Georgiana's beauty and rendered her countenance even hideous. But it would be as reasonable to say that one of those small blue stains which sometimes occur in the purest statuary marble would convert the Eve of Powers to a monster. Masculine observers, if the birthmark did not heighten their admiration, contented themselves with wishing it away, that the world might possess one living specimen of ideal loveliness without the semblance of a flaw. After his marriage,—for he thought little or nothing of the matter before,—Aylmer discovered that this was the case with himself.

Had she been less beautiful,—if Envy's self could have found aught else to sneer at,—he might have felt his affection heightened by the prettiness of this mimic hand, now vaguely portrayed, now lost, now stealing forth again and glimmering to and fro with every pulse of emotion that throbbed within her heart; but, seeing her otherwise so perfect, he found this one defect grow more and more intolerable with every moment of their united lives. It was the fatal flaw of humanity which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions, either to imply that they are temporary and finite, or that their perfection must be wrought by toil and pain. The crimson hand expressed the ineludible gripe in which mortality clutches the highest and purest of earthly mold, degrading them into kindred with the lowest, and even with the very brutes, like whom their visible frames return to dust. In this manner, selecting it as the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death, Aylmer's somber imagination was not long in rendering the birthmark a frightful object, causing him more trouble and horror than ever Georgiana's beauty, whether of soul or sense, had given him delight.

At all the seasons which should have been their happiest he invariably, and without intending it, nay, in spite of a purpose to the contrary, reverted to this one disastrous topic. Trifling as it at first appeared, it so connected itself with innumerable trains of thought and modes of feeling that it became the central point of all. With the morning twilight Aylmer opened his eyes upon his wife's face and recognized the symbol of imperfection; and when they sat together at the evening hearth his eyes wandered stealthily to her cheek, and beheld, flickering with the blaze of the wood fire, the spectral hand that wrote mortality where he would fain have worshiped. Georgiana soon learned to shudder at his gaze. It

needed but a glance with the peculiar expression that his face often wore to change the roses of her cheek into a deathlike paleness, amid which the crimson hand was brought strongly out, like a bas-relief of ruby on the whitest marble.

LATE one night, when the lights were growing dim so as hardly to betray the stain on the poor wife's cheek, she herself, for the first time, voluntarily took up the subject.

"Do you remember, my dear Aylmer," said she, with a feeble attempt at a smile, "have you any recollection, of a dream last night about this odious hand?"

"None! none whatever!" replied Aylmer, starting; but then he added, in a dry, cold tone, affected for the sake of concealing the real depth of his emotion, "I might well dream of it; for, before I fell asleep, it had taken a pretty firm hold of my fancy."

"And you did dream of it?" continued Georgiana, hastily; for she dreaded lest a gush of tears should interrupt what she had to say. "A terrible dream! I wonder that you can forget it. Is it possible to forget this one expression?—'It is in her heart now; we must have it out!' Reflect, my husband; for by all means I would have you recall that dream."

The mind is in a sad state when Sleep, the all-involving, can not confine her specters within the dim region of her sway, but suffers them to break forth, affrighting this actual life with secrets that perchance belong to a deeper one. Aylmer now remembered his dream. He had fancied himself with his servant Aminadab, attempting an operation for the removal of the birthmark; but the deeper went the knife, the deeper sank the hand, until at length its tiny grasp appeared to have caught hold of Georgiana's heart; whence, however, her husband was inexorably resolved to cut or wrench it away.

When the dream had shaped itself perfectly in his memory Aylmer sat in his wife's presence with a guilty feeling. Truth often finds its way to the mind close muffled in robes of sleep, and then speaks with uncompromising directness of matters in regard to which we practise an unconscious self-deception during our waking moments. Until now he had not been aware of the tyrannizing influence acquired by one idea over his mind, and of the lengths which he might find it in his heart to go for the sake of giving himself peace.

"Aylmer," resumed Georgiana, solemnly, "I know not what may be the cost to both of us to rid me of this fatal birthmark. Perhaps its removal may cause cureless deformity; or it may be the stain goes as deep as life itself. Again: do we know that there is a possibility, on any terms, of unclasping the firm gripe of this little hand which was laid upon me before I came into the world?"

"Dearest Georgiana, I have spent much thought upon the subject," hastily interrupted Aylmer. "I am convinced of the perfect practicability of its removal."

"If there be the remotest possibility of it," continued Georgiana, "let the attempt be made, at whatever risk. Danger is nothing to me; for life, while this hateful mark makes me the object of your horror and disgust,—life is a burden which I would fling down with joy. Either remove this dreadful hand, or take my wretched life! You have deep science. All the world bears witness of it. You have achieved great wonders. Can you not remove this little, little mark, which I cover with the tips of two small fingers? Is this beyond your power, for the sake of your own peace, and to save your poor wife from madness?"

"Noblest, dearest, tenderest wife,"

cried Aylmer, rapturously, "doubt not my power. I have already given this matter the deepest thought—thought which might almost have enlightened me to create a being less perfect than yourself. Georgiana, you have led me deeper than ever into the heart of science. I feel myself fully competent to render this dear cheek as faultless as its fellow; and then, most beloved, what will be my triumph when I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work! Even Pygmalion, when his sculptured woman assumed life, felt not greater ecstasy than mine will be."

"It is resolved, then," said Georgiana, faintly smiling. "And, Aylmer, spare me not, though you should find the birthmark take refuge in my heart at last."

Her husband tenderly kissed her cheek—her right cheek—not that which bore the impress of the crimson hand.

The next day Aylmer apprized his wife of a plan that he had formed whereby he might have opportunity for the intense thought and constant watchfulness which the proposed operation would require; while Georgiana, likewise, would enjoy the perfect repose essential to its success. They were to seclude themselves in the extensive apartments occupied by Aylmer as a laboratory, and where, during his toilsome youth, he had made discoveries in the elemental powers of Nature that had roused the admiration of all the learned societies in Europe. Seated calmly in this laboratory, the pale philosopher had investigated the secrets of the highest cloud region and of the profoundest mines; he had satisfied himself of the causes that kindled and kept alive the fires of the volcano; and had explained the mystery of fountains, and how it is that they gush forth, some so bright and pure, and others with such rich medicinal virtues, from the dark bosom of the earth. Here, too, at an earlier period, he had studied the wonders of the human frame, and attempted to fathom the very process by which Nature assimilates all her precious influences from earth and air, and from the spiritual world, to create and foster man, her masterpiece. The latter pursuit, however, Aylmer had long laid aside in unwilling recognition of the truth—against which all seekers sooner or later stumble—that our great creative Mother, while she amuses us with apparently working in the broadest sunshine, is yet severely careful to keep her own secrets, and, in spite of her pretended openness, shows us nothing but results. She permits us, indeed, to mar, but seldom to mend, and, like a jealous patentee, on no account to make. Now, however, Aylmer resumed these half-forgotten investigations; not, of course, with such hopes or wishes as first suggested them; but because they involved much physiological truth and lay in the path of his proposed scheme for the treatment of Georgiana.

As he led her over the threshold of the laboratory Georgiana was cold and tremulous. Aylmer looked cheerfully into her face, with intent to reassure her, but was so startled with the intense glow of the birthmark upon the whiteness of her cheek that he could not restrain a strong convulsive shudder. His wife fainted.

"Aminadab! Aminadab!" shouted Aylmer, stamping violently on the floor.

Forthwith there issued from an inner apartment a man of low stature, but bulky frame, with shaggy hair hanging about his visage, which was grimed with the vapors of the furnace. This personage had been Aylmer's underworker during his whole scientific career, and was admirably fitted for that office by his great mechanical readiness, and the skill with

which, while incapable of comprehending a single principle, he executed all the details of his master's experiments. With his vast strength, his shaggy hair, his smoky aspect, and the indescribable earthiness that incrusted him, he seemed to represent man's physical nature; while Aylmer's slender figure, and pale, intellectual face, were no less apt a type of the spiritual element.

"Throw open the door of the boudoir, Aminadab," said Aylmer, "and burn a pastil."

"Yes, master," answered Aminadab, looking intently at the lifeless form of Georgiana; and then he muttered to himself, "If she were my wife, I'd never part with that birthmark."

When Georgiana recovered consciousness she found herself breathing an atmosphere of penetrating fragrance, the gentle potency of which had recalled her from her deathlike faintness. The scene around her looked like enchantment. Aylmer had converted those smoky, dingy, somber rooms, where he had spent his brightest years in recondite pursuits, into a series of beautiful apartments not unfit to be the secluded abode of a lovely woman. The walls were hung with gorgeous curtains, which imparted the combination of grandeur and grace that no other species of adornment can achieve; and, as they fell from the ceiling to the floor, their rich and ponderous folds, concealing all angles and straight lines, appeared to shut in the scene from infinite space. For aught Georgiana knew, it might be a pavilion among the clouds. And Aylmer, excluding the sunshine, which would have interfered with his chemical processes, had supplied its place with perfumed lamps, emitting flames of various hue, but all uniting in a soft, impurpled radiance. He now knelt by his wife's side, watching her earnestly, but without alarm; for he was confident in his science, and felt that he could draw a magic circle round her within which no evil might intrude.

"Where am I? Ah, I remember," said Georgiana, faintly; and she placed her hand over her cheek to hide the terrible mark from her husband's eyes.

"Fear not, dearest!" exclaimed he. "Do not shrink from me! Believe me, Georgiana, I even rejoice in this single imperfection, since it will be such a rapture to remove it."

"O, spare me!" sadly replied his wife. "Pray do not look at it again. I never can forget that convulsive shudder."

In order to soothe Georgiana, and, as it were, to release her mind from the burden of actual things, Aylmer now put in practise some of the light and playful secrets which science had taught him among its profounder lore. Airy figures, absolutely bodiless ideas, and forms of unsubstantial beauty came and danced before her, imprinting their momentary footsteps on beams of light. Though she had some indistinct idea of the method of these optical phenomena, still the illusion was almost perfect enough to warrant the belief that her husband possessed sway over the spiritual world. Then again, when she felt a wish to look forth from her seclusion, immediately, as if her thoughts were answered, the procession of external existence flitted across a screen. The scenery and the figures of actual life were perfectly represented, but with that bewitching yet indescribable difference which always makes a picture, an image, or a shadow so much more attractive than the original. When wearied of this, Aylmer bade her cast her eyes upon a vessel containing a quantity of earth. She did so, with little interest at first; but was soon startled to perceive the germ of a plant shooting upward from the soil. Then came the slender stalk; the leaves gradually unfolded

themselves; and amid them was a perfect and lovely flower.

"It is magical!" cried Georgiana. "I dare not touch it."

"Nay, pluck it," answered Aylmer,—"pluck it, and inhale its brief perfume while you may. The flower will wither in a few moments and leave nothing save its brown seed vessels; but thence may be perpetuated a race as ephemeral as itself."

But Georgiana had no sooner touched the flower than the whole plant suffered a blight, its leaves turning coal-black as if by the agency of fire.

"There was too powerful a stimulus," said Aylmer, thoughtfully.

To make up for this abortive experiment, he proposed to take her portrait by a scientific process of his own invention. It was to be effected by rays of light striking upon a polished plate of metal. Georgiana assented; but, on looking at the result, was affrighted to find the features of the portrait blurred and indefinable; while the minute figure of a hand appeared where the cheek should have been. Aylmer snatched the metallic plate and threw it into a jar of corrosive acid.

Soon, however, he forgot these mortifying failures. In the intervals of study and chemical experiment he came to her flushed and exhausted, but seemed invigorated by her presence, and spoke in glowing language of the resources of his art. He gave a history of the long dynasty of the alchemists, who spent so many ages in quest of the universal solvent by which the golden principle might be elicited from all things vile and base. Aylmer appeared to believe that, by the plainest scientific logic, it was altogether within the limits of possibility to discover this long-sought medium; "but," he added, "a philosopher who should go deep enough to acquire the power would attain too lofty a wisdom to stoop to the exercise of it." Not less singular were his opinions in regard to the elixir vitæ. He more than intimated that it was at his option to concoct a liquid that should prolong life for years, perhaps interminably; but that it would produce a discord in Nature which all the world, and chiefly the quaffer of the immortal nostrum, would find cause to curse.

"Aylmer, are you in earnest?" asked Georgiana, looking at him with amazement and fear. "It is terrible to possess such power, or even to dream of possessing it."

"O, do not tremble, my love," said her husband. "I would not wrong either you or myself by working such inharmonious effects upon our lives; but I would have you consider how trifling, in comparison, is the skill requisite to remove this little hand."

At the mention of the birthmark Georgiana, as usual, shrank as if a redhot iron had touched her cheek.

Again Aylmer applied himself to his labors. She could hear his voice in the distant furnace room giving directions to Aminadab, whose harsh, uncouth, misshapen tones were audible in response, more like the grunt or growl of a brute than human speech. After hours of absence, Aylmer reappeared and proposed that she should now examine his cabinet of chemical products and natural treasures of the earth. Among the former he showed her a small vial, in which, he remarked, was contained a gentle yet most powerful fragrance, capable of impregnating all the breezes that blow across a kingdom. They were of inestimable value, the contents of that little vial; and, as he said so, he threw some of the perfume into the air and filled the room with piercing and invigorating delight.

"And what is this?" asked Georgiana, pointing to a small crystal globe containing a gold-colored liquid. "It

is so beautiful to the eye that I could imagine it the elixir of life."

"In one sense it is," replied Aylmer; "or rather, the elixir of immortality. It is the most precious poison that ever was concocted in this world. By its aid I could apportion the lifetime of any mortal at whom you might point your finger. The strength of the dose would determine whether he were to linger out years, or drop dead in the midst of a breath. No king on his guarded throne could keep his life if I, in my private station, should deem that the welfare of millions justified me in depriving him of it."

"Why do you keep such a terrific drug?" inquired Georgiana in horror.

"Do not mistrust me, dearest," said her husband, smiling; "its virtuous potency is yet greater than its harmful one. But see! here is a powerful cosmetic. With a few drops of this in a vase of water, freckles may be washed away as easily as the hands are cleansed. A stronger infusion would take the blood out of the cheek, and leave the rosiest beauty a pale ghost."

"Is it with this lotion that you intend to bathe my cheek?" asked Georgiana, anxiously.

"O, no," hastily replied her husband; "this is merely superficial. Your case demands a remedy that shall go deeper."

In his interviews with Georgiana, Aylmer generally made minute inquiries as to her sensations, and whether the confinement of the rooms and the temperature of the atmosphere agreed with her. These questions had such a particular drift that Georgiana began to conjecture that she was already subjected to certain physical influences, either breathed in with the fragrant air or taken with her food. She fancied likewise, but it might be altogether fancy, that there was a stirring up of her system—a strange, indefinite sensation creeping through her veins, and tingling, half painfully, half pleasurably, at her heart. Still, whenever she dared to look into the mirror, there she beheld herself pale as a white rose and with the crimson birthmark stamped upon her cheek. Not even Aylmer now hated it so much as she.

To dispel the tedium of the hours which her husband found it necessary to devote to the processes of combination and analysis, Georgiana turned over the volumes of his scientific library. In many dark old tomes she met with chapters full of romance and poetry. They were the works of the philosophers of the middle ages, such as Albertus Magnus, Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, and the famous friar who created the prophetic Brazen Head. All these antique naturalists stood in advance of their centuries, yet were imbued with some of their credulity, and therefore were believed, and perhaps imagined themselves to have acquired from the investigation of Nature a power above Nature, and from physics a sway over the spiritual world. Hardly less curious and imaginative were the early volumes of the *Transactions of the Royal Society*, in which the members, knowing little of the limits of natural possibility, were continually recording wonders or proposing methods whereby wonders might be wrought.

But, to Georgiana, the most engrossing volume was a large folio from her husband's own hand, in which he had recorded every experiment of his scientific career, its original aim, the methods adopted for its development, and its final success or failure, with the circumstances to which either event was attributable. The book, in truth, was both the history and emblem of his ardent, ambitious, imaginative, yet practical and laborious life. He handled physical details as if there were nothing beyond them; yet spiritualized them all, and redeemed himself from material-

ism by his strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite. In his grasp the veriest clod of earth assumed a soul. Georgiana, as she read, reverenced Aylmer and loved him more profoundly than ever, but with a less entire dependence on his judgment than heretofore. Much as he had accomplished, she could not but observe that his most splendid successes were almost invariably failures, if compared with the ideal at which he aimed. His brightest diamonds were the merest pebbles, and felt to be so by himself, in comparison with the inestimable gems which lay hidden beyond his reach. The volume, rich with achievements that had won renown for its author, was yet as melancholy a record as ever mortal hand had penned. It was the sad confession and continual exemplification of the shortcomings of the composite man, the spirit burdened with clay and working in matter, and of the despair that assails the higher nature at finding itself so miserably thwarted by the earthly part. Perhaps every man of genius, in whatever sphere, might recognize the image of his own experience in Aylmer's journal.

So deeply did these reflections affect Georgiana that she laid her face upon the open volume and burst into tears. In this situation she was found by her husband.

"It is dangerous to read in a sorcerer's books," said he with a smile, though his countenance was uneasy and displeased. "Georgiana, there are pages in that volume which I can scarcely glance over and keep my senses. Take heed lest it prove as detrimental to you."

"It has made me worship you more than ever," said she.

"Ah, wait for this one success," rejoined he, "then worship me if you will. I shall deem myself hardly unworthy of it. But come, I have sought you for the luxury of your voice. Sing to me, dearest."

So she poured out the liquid music of her voice to quench the thirst of his spirit. He then took his leave with a boyish exuberance of gayety, assuring her that her seclusion would endure but a little longer, and that the result was already certain. Scarcely had he departed when Georgiana felt irresistibly impelled to follow him. She had forgotten to inform Aylmer of a symptom which for two or three hours past had begun to excite her attention. It was a sensation in the fatal birthmark, not painful, but which induced a restlessness throughout her system. Hastening after her husband, she intruded for the first time into the laboratory.

The first thing that struck her eye was the furnace, that hot and feverish worker, with the intense glow of its fire, which by the quantities of soot clustered above it seemed to have been burning for ages. There was a distilling apparatus in full operation. Around the room were retorts, tubes, cylinders, crucibles, and other apparatus of chemical research. An electrical machine stood ready for immediate use. The atmosphere felt oppressively close, and was tainted with gaseous odors which had been tormented forth by the processes of science. The severe and homely simplicity of the apartment, with its naked walls and brick pavement, looked strange, accustomed as Georgiana had become to the fantastic elegance of her boudoir. But what chiefly, indeed almost solely, drew her attention, was the aspect of Aylmer himself.

He was pale as death, anxious and absorbed, and hung over the furnace as if it depended upon his utmost watchfulness whether the liquid which it was distilling should be the draft of immortal happiness or misery. How different from the sanguine and joyous mien that he had assumed for Georgiana's encouragement!

"Carefully now, Aminadab; carefully, thou human machine; carefully, thou man of clay," muttered Aylmer, more to himself than his assistant. "Now, if there be a thought too much or too little, it is all over."

"Ho! ho!" mumbled Aminadab. "Look, master! look!"

Aylmer raised his eyes hastily, and at first reddened, then grew paler than ever, on beholding Georgiana. He rushed towards her and seized her arm with a gripe that left the print of his fingers upon it.

"Why do you come hither? Have you no trust in your husband?" cried he, impetuously. "Would you throw the blight of that fatal birthmark over my labors? It is not well done. Go, prying woman! go!"

"Nay, Aylmer," said Georgiana with the firmness of which she possessed no stinted endowment, "it is not you that have a right to complain. You mistrust your wife; you have concealed the anxiety with which you watch the development of this experiment. Think not so unworthily of me, my husband. Tell me all the risk we run, and fear not that I shall shrink; for my share in it is far less than your own."

"No, no, Georgiana!" said Aylmer, impatiently; "it must not be."

"I submit," replied she, calmly. "And, Aylmer, I shall quaff whatever draft you bring me; but it will be on the same principle that would induce me to take a dose of poison if offered by your hand."

"My noble wife," said Aylmer, deeply moved, "I knew not the height and depth of your nature until now. Nothing shall be concealed. Know, then, that this crimson hand, superficial as it seems, has clutched its grasp into your being with a strength of which I had no previous conception. I have already administered agents powerful enough to do aught except to change your entire physical system. Only one thing remains to be tried. If that fail us we are ruined."

"Why did you hesitate to tell me this?" asked she.

"Because, Georgiana," said Aylmer, in a low voice, "there is danger."

"Danger? There is but one danger—that this horrible stigma shall be left upon my cheek!" cried Georgiana. "Remove it, remove it, whatever be the cost, or we shall both go mad!"

"Heaven knows your words are too true," said Aylmer, sadly. "And now, dearest, return to your boudoir. In a little while all will be tested."

He conducted her back and took leave of her with a solemn tenderness which spoke far more than his words how much was now at stake. After his departure Georgiana became rapt in musings. She considered the character of Aylmer and did it completer justice than at any previous moment. Her heart exulted, while it trembled at his honorable love—so pure and lofty that it would accept nothing less than perfection nor miserably make itself contented with an earthlier nature than he had dreamed of. She felt how much more precious was such a sentiment than that meaner kind which would have borne with the imperfection for her sake, and have been guilty of treason to holy love by degrading its perfect idea to the level of the actual; and with her whole spirit she prayed that, for a single moment, she might satisfy his highest and deepest conception. Longer than one moment she well knew it could not be; for his spirit was ever on the march, ever ascending, and each instant required something that was beyond the scope of the instant before.

The sound of her husband's footsteps aroused her. He bore a crystal goblet containing a liquor colorless as water, but bright enough to

be the draft of immortality. Aylmer was pale; but it seemed rather the consequence of a highly-wrought state of mind and tension of spirit than of fear or doubt.

"The concoction of the draft has been perfect," said he, in answer to Georgiana's look. "Unless all my science have deceived me, it can not fail."

"Save on your account, my dearest Aylmer," observed his wife, "I might wish to put off this birthmark of mortality by relinquishing mortality itself in preference to any other mode. Life is but a sad possession to those who have attained precisely the degree of moral advancement at which I stand. Were I weaker and blinder, it might be happiness. Were I stronger, it might be endured hopefully. But, being what I find myself, methinks I am of all mortals the most fit to die."

"You are fit for heaven without tasting death!" replied her husband. "But why do we speak of dying? The draft can not fail. Behold its effect upon this plant."

On the window seat there stood a geranium diseased with yellow blotches which had overspread all its leaves. Aylmer poured a small quantity of the liquid upon the soil in which it grew. In a little time, when the roots of the plant had taken up the moisture, the unsightly blotches began to be extinguished in a living verdure.

"There needed no proof," said Georgiana, quietly. "Give me the goblet. I joyfully stake all upon your word."

"Drink, then, thou lofty creature!" exclaimed Aylmer, with fervid admiration. "There is no taint of imperfection on thy spirit. Thy sensible frame, too, shall soon be all perfect."

She quaffed the liquid and returned the goblet to his hand.

"It is grateful," said she, with a placid smile. "Methinks it is like water from a heavenly fountain; for it contains I know not what of unobtrusive fragrance and deliciousness. It allays a feverish thirst that had parched me for many days. Now, dearest, let me sleep. My earthly senses are closing over my spirit like the leaves around the heart of a rose at sunset."

She spoke the last words with a gentle reluctance, as if it required almost more energy than she could command to pronounce the faint and lingering syllables. Scarcely had they loitered through her lips ere she was lost in slumber. Aylmer sat by her side, watching her aspect with the emotions proper to a man the whole value of whose existence was involved in the process now to be tested. Mingled with this mood, however, was the philosophic investigation characteristic of the man of science. Not the minutest symptom escaped him. A heightened flush of the cheek, a slight irregularity of breath, a quiver of the eyelid, a hardly perceptible tremor through the frame,—such were the details which, as the moments passed, he wrote down in his folio volume. Intense thought had set its stamp upon every previous page of that volume; but the thoughts of years were all concentrated upon the last.

While thus employed, he failed not to gaze often at the fatal hand, and not without a shudder. Yet once, by a strange and unaccountable impulse, he pressed it with his lips. His spirit recoiled, however, in the very act; and Georgiana, out of the midst of her deep sleep, moved uneasily and murmured as if in remonstrance. Again Aylmer resumed his watch. Nor was it without avail. The crimson hand, which at first had been strongly visible upon the marble paleness of Georgiana's cheek, now grew more faintly outlined. She remained not less pale than ever; but the birthmark, with every breath that came and went, lost somewhat of its former distinctness.

Its presence had been awful; its departure was more awful still. Watch the stain of the rainbow fading out of the sky, and you will know how that mysterious symbol passed away.

"By Heaven! it is well nigh gone!" said Aylmer to himself, in almost irrepressible ecstasy. "I can scarcely trace it now. Success! success! And now it is like the faintest rose color. The lightest flush of blood across her cheek would overcome it. But she is so pale!"

He drew aside the window curtain and suffered the light of natural day to fall into the room and rest upon her cheek. At the same time he heard a gross, hoarse chuckle, which he had long known as his servant Aminadab's expression of delight.

"Ah, clod! ah, earthly mass!" cried Aylmer, laughing in a sort of frenzy; "you have served me well! Matter and spirit—earth and heaven—have both done their part in this! Laugh, thing of the senses! You have earned the right to laugh."

These exclamations broke Georgiana's sleep. She slowly unclosed her eyes and gazed into the mirror which her husband had arranged for that purpose. A faint smile flitted over her lips when she recognized how barely perceptible was now that crimson hand which had once blazed forth with such disastrous brilliancy as to scare away all their happiness. But then her eyes sought Aylmer's face with a trouble and anxiety that he could by no means account for.

"My poor Aylmer!" murmured she.

"Poor! Nay, richest, happiest, most favored!" exclaimed he. "My peerless bride, it is successful! You are perfect!"

"My poor Aylmer," she repeated, with a more than human tenderness, "you have aimed loftily; you have done nobly. Do not repent that, with so high and pure a feeling, you have rejected the best the earth could offer. Aylmer, dearest Aylmer, I am dying!"

Alas! it was too true! The fatal hand had grappled with the mystery of life, and was the bond by which an angelic spirit kept itself in union with a mortal frame. As the last crimson tint of the birthmark—that sole token of human imperfection—faded from her cheek, the parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere, and her soul, lingering a moment near her husband, took its heavenward flight. Then a hoarse, chuckling laugh was heard again! Thus ever does the gross fatality of earth exult in its invariable triumph over the immortal essence which, in this dim sphere of half development, demands the completeness of a higher state. Yet, had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the selfsame texture with the celestial. The momentary circumstance was too strong for him; he failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time, and, living once for all in eternity, to find the perfect future in the present.

Next Month's Reprint Story Will Be "The Horla," by Guy de Maupassant

A RUNAWAY WORLD

by Clare Winger Harris

"We are plunging headlong into a mammoth sun," he said. "If it continues to draw us into it, the Earth will become a gaseous mass."

THE laboratory of Henry Shipley was a conglomeration of test-tubes, bottles, mysterious physical and chemical appliances and papers covered with indecipherable script. The man himself was in no angelic mood as he sat at his desk and surveyed the hopeless litter about him. His years may have numbered five and thirty, but young though he was, no man excelled him in his chosen profession.

"Curse that maid!" he muttered in exasperation. "If she possessed even an ordinary amount of intelligence she could tidy up this place and still leave my notes and paraphernalia intact. As it is I can't find the account of that important nitrogen experiment."

At this moment a loud knock at the door put an abrupt end to further soliloquy. In response to Shipley's curt "come in," the door opened and a stranger, possibly ten years older than Shipley, entered. The newcomer surveyed the young scientist through piercing eyes of nondescript hue. The outline of mouth and chin was only faintly suggested through a Vandyke beard.

Something in the new arrival's gaze did not encourage speech, so Shipley mutely pointed to a chair, and upon perceiving that the seat was covered with papers, hastened to clear them away.

"Have I the honor of addressing Henry Shipley, authority on atomic energy?" asked the man, seating himself, apparently unmindful of the younger man's confusion.

"I am Henry Shipley, but as to being an authority——"

The stranger raised a deprecating hand, "Never mind. We can dispense

with the modesty, Mr. Shipley. I have come upon a matter of world-wide importance. Possibly you have heard of me. La Rue is my name; Leon La Rue."

Henry Shipley's eyes grew wide with astonishment.

"Indeed I am honored by the visit of so renowned a scientist," he cried with genuine enthusiasm.

"It is nothing," said La Rue. "I love my work."

"You and John Olmstead," said Shipley, "have given humanity a clearer conception of the universe about us in the past hundred years, than any others have done. Here it is now the year 2026 A. D. and we have established by radio regular communication with Mars, Venus, two of the moons of Jupiter, and recently it has been broadcast that messages are being received from outside our solar system, communications from interstellar space! Is that true?"

"It is," replied La Rue. "During the past six months my worthy colleague Jules Nichol and I have received messages (some of them not very intelligible) from two planets that revolve around one of the nearer suns. These messages have required years to reach us, although they traveled at an inconceivable rate of speed."

"How do you manage to carry on intelligent communication? Surely the languages must be very strange," said the thoroughly interested Shipley.

"We begin all intercourse through the principles of mathematics," replied the Frenchman with a smile, "for by those exact principles God's universe is controlled. Those rules never fail. You know the principles of mathematics were discovered by man, not invented by him. This, then, is the basis of our code, always, and it never fails to bring intelligent responses from other planets whose inhabitants have arrived at an understanding equal to or surpassing that of ourselves. It is not a stretch of imagination to believe that we may some day receive a message from somewhere in space, that was sent out millions of years ago, and likewise we can comprehend the possibility of messages which we are now sending into the all-pervading ether, reaching some remote world eons in the future."

"It is indeed a fascinating subject," mused Henry Shipley, "but mine has an equal attraction. While you reach out among the stars, I delve down amid the protons and electrons. And who, my dear fellow, in this day of scientific advancement, can say that they are not identical except for size? Planets revolve about their suns, electrons around their protons; the infinite, the infinitesimal! What distinguishes them?"

The older man leaned forward, a white hand clutching the cluttered desk.

"What distinguishes them, you ask?" he muttered hoarsely. "This and this alone; *time*, the fourth dimension!"

The two men gazed at one another in profound silence, then La Rue continued, his voice once more back to normal: "You said a moment ago that my planetary systems and your atoms were identical except for one thing—the fourth dimension. In my supra-world of infinite bigness our sun, one million times as big as this Earth, gigantic Jupiter, and all the other planets in our little system, would seem as small as an atom, a thing invisible even in the most powerful microscope. Your infra-world would be like a single atom with electrons revolving around it, compared to our solar system, sun and planets. I believe the invisible atom is another universe with its central sun and revolving planets, and there also exists a supra-universe in which our sun,

the Earth and all the planets are only an atom. But the fourth dimension!"

La Rue picked up a minute speck of dust from the table and regarded it a moment in silence, then he went on: "Who knows but that this tiny particle of matter which I hold may contain a universe in that infra-world, and that during our conversation eons may have passed to the possible inhabitants of the planets therein? So we come to the fact that time is the fourth dimension. Let me read you what a scientist of an earlier day has written, a man who was so far ahead of his time that he was wholly unappreciated:

"'If you lived on a planet infinitesimally small, or infinitely big, you would not know the difference. Time and space are, after all, purely relative. If at midnight tonight, all things, including ourselves and our measuring instruments, were reduced in size one thousand times, we should be left quite unaware of any such change.'

"But I wish to read you a message which I received at my radio station on the Eiffel Tower at Paris."

La Rue produced a paper from a pocket and read the following radiogram from Mars:

"'A most horrible catastrophe is befalling us. We are leaving the solar system! The sun grows daily smaller. Soon we shall be plunged in eternal gloom. The cold is becoming unbearable'!"

When the Frenchman had finished reading he continued addressing the physicist: "A few astronomers are aware of the departure of Mars from the system, but are keeping it from the public temporarily. What do you think of this whole business, Shipley?"

"The phenomenon is quite clear," the latter replied. "Some intelligent beings in this vaster cosmos or supra-universe, in which we are but a molecule, have begun an experiment which is a common one in chemistry, an experiment in which one or two electrons in each atom are torn away, resulting, as you already know, in the formation of a new element. Their experiment will cause a rearrangement in our universe."

"Yes," smiled La Rue significantly, "every time we perform a similar experiment, millions of planets leave their suns in that next smaller cosmos or infra-world. But why isn't it commoner even around us?"

"There is where the time element comes in," answered his friend. "Think of the rarity of such an experiment upon a particular molecule or group of molecules, and you will plainly see why it has never happened in all the eons of time that our universe has passed through."

There was a moment's silence as both men realized their human inability to grasp even a vague conception of the idea of relativity. This silence was broken by the foreigner, who spoke in eager accents: "Will you not, my friend, return with me to Paris? And together at my radio station, we will listen to the messages from the truant Mars."

2

The radio station of La Rue was the most interesting place Shipley had ever visited. Here were perfected instruments of television. An observer from this tower could both see and hear any place on the globe. As yet, seeing beyond our Earth had not been scientifically perfected.

La Rue had been eager to hear from his assistant any further messages from Mars. These could have been forwarded to him when he was in the States, but he preferred to wait until his return to his beloved station. There was nothing startlingly new in any of the communications. All showed despair regarding the Martians' ability to survive, with

their rare atmosphere, the cold of outer space. As the planet retreated and was lost to view even by the most powerful telescopes, the messages grew fainter, and finally ceased altogether.

By this time alarm had spread beyond scientific circles. Every serious-minded being upon the globe sought for a plausible explanation of the phenomenon.

"Now is the time for your revelation," urged La Rue. "Tell the world what you told me."

But the world at large did not approve of Henry Shipley's theory. People did not arrive at any unanimous decision. The opinion was prevalent that Mars had become so wicked and had come so near to fathoming the Creator's secrets, that it was banished into outer darkness as a punishment.

"Its fate should," they said, "prove a warning to Earth."

The scientists smiled at this interpretation. As a body of enlightened and religious men they knew that God does not object to His Truth being known, that only by a knowledge of the Truth can we become fully conscious of His will concerning us.

The frivolous, pleasure-seeking, self-centered world soon forgot the fate of the ruddy planet, and then—but that is my story!

3

It was five months to the day after the radios had first broadcast the startling news that Mars was no longer revolving around the sun, that I, James Griffin, sat at breakfast with my wife and two children, Eleanor and Jimmy, Jr. I am not and never have been an astronomical man. Mundane affairs have always kept me too busy for star-gazing, so it is not to be wondered at that the news of Mars' departure did not deeply concern me. But the whole affair was, much to my chagrin, indirectly the cause of a dreadful blunder at the office.

"Mars was closer to the sun than we are," I had remarked one day to Zutell, my assistant at the office, "but I'll bet the old war-planet is getting pretty well cooled off by now."

Zutell looked at me with a peculiar expression which I haven't forgotten to this day.

more remote from the sun than Earth?" he ejaculated. "Why, man alive, didn't you know Mars' orbit is more remote from the sun than ours?"

His manner was extraordinarily convincing, and inwardly I was mortified at my ignorance.

"It is not!" I declared stubbornly, then added weakly, "Anyhow, what difference does it make?"

His glance of amused condescension stung my pride, and from that time on his already too sufficient self-confidence increased. In his presence I seemed to be suffering from an inferiority complex. I laid the entire blame for my loss of self-confidence upon the truant Mars, and secretly wished the ruddy planet all kinds of bad luck.

But to return to the breakfast table. My wife, Vera, poured me a second cup of coffee and remarked sweetly, "The Zutells are coming over this morning, since it is a holiday, dear, to listen to the radio and see in the new televisio. You know President Bedford is to address the nation from the newly completed capitol building, which will be seen for the first time in the televisio. If you like, I'll ask the Mardens, too. You seem to like them so much."

"Hang it all," I said irritably, "can't you leave the Zutells out of it? Ed's forever rubbing in something about Jupiter or Venus, now

that Mars is gone. He's an insufferable bore!"

"Why, Jim," cried Vera, half laughing, "as sure as fate I do believe you're jealous, just because——"

"Jealous!" I burst out. "Jealous of him? Why, I can show him cards and spades——"

"I know you can. That's just it," laughed Vera; "that's just why it's so funny to have you care because you didn't know about Mars. It's much more important that you know more about cost-accounting than Ed does."

Vera was right, as usual, and I rewarded her with a kiss just as Junior screamed that Archie Zutell was coming across the lawn to play with him and Eleanor.

"Well, you kids clear out of here," I said, "and play outside if we grown-ups are expected to see anything of the president and hear his address, and Jimmy, don't let Archie put anything over on you. Stick up for your rights."

I imagined Vera smiled a little indulgently and I didn't like it.

"Well, at any rate," I said, "I do like young Marden and his bride. There's a fellow that really is an astronomer, but he never shoots off his mouth about it in inappropriate places."

Truth was, Marden held a high college degree in astronomy and taught the subject in our local college. Just across the street from our residence, which faced the beautiful campus, stood the observatory on a picturesque elevation. Many summer evenings since my deplorable error in regard to Mars I had visited the observatory with Oscar Marden and learned much that was interesting about the starry host.

The breakfast dishes cleared away, Vera and I seated ourselves at our new televisio that worked in combination with the radio. It was the envy of the neighborhood, there being but three others in the entire town that could compare with it. There was yet half an hour before the president's address was scheduled to commence. We turned on the electricity. Vice-president Ellsworth was speaking. We gazed into the great oval mirror and saw that he was in the private office of his own residence. A door opened behind him and a tall man entered the room, lifted his hand in dignified salutation, and smiled at his unseen spectators. Then in clear resonant tones he began addressing his invisible audience in a preliminary talk preceding the one to be delivered from the new capitol steps.

At this point the Mardens and Zutells arrived, and after the exchange of a few pleasantries, were comfortably seated pending the main address of the morning.

"Citizens of the Republic of the United Americas," began President Bedford.

I reached for the dials, and with a slight manipulation the man's voice was as clear as if he talked with us in the room. I turned another dial, and the hazy outlines were cleared, bringing the tall, manly form into correct perspective. Behind him rose the massive columns of the new capitol building in Central America.

The address, an exceptionally inspiring one, continued while the six of us in our Midwestern town were seeing and hearing with millions of others throughout the country, a man thousands of miles away. The day had commenced cloudy, but ere long the sun was shining with dazzling splendor. Meanwhile the president continued to speak in simple but eloquent style of the future of our great republic. So engrossed were we six, and undoubtedly millions of others upon two continents, to say nothing of the scattered radio audience throughout the world, that for some time we had failed to notice the de-

creasing light. Mrs. Zutell had been the first to make the casual remark that it was clouding up again, but a rather curt acknowledgment of her comment on the part of the rest of us had discouraged further attempts at conversation.

Not long afterward the front door burst open and the three children rushed in, making all attempts of the elders to listen to the address futile.

"Mamma, it is getting darker and colder," exclaimed Eleanor. "We want our wraps on."

"Put on the lights!" cried Jimmy, suiting the action to the word.

With the flood of light any growing apprehension that we may have felt diminished, but as we looked through the windows we noticed that outside it was dusk though the time was but 10 a. m.

Our faces looked strangely drawn and haggard, but it was the expression on young Marden's face that caught and held my attention. I believe as I review those dreadful times in my mind, that Oscar Marden knew then what ailed this old world of ours, but he said not a word at that time.

We turned our faces to the televisio again and were amazed at the scene which was there presented. President Bedford had ceased speaking and was engaged in earnest conversation with other men who had joined him. The growing darkness outside the capitol made it difficult to distinguish our leader's figure among the others, who in ever-growing numbers thronged the steps of the great edifice. Presently the president again turned to the invisible millions seated behind their radios and televisios, and spoke. His voice was calm, as befitted the leader of so great a nation, but it was fraught with an emotion that did not escape observing watchers and listeners.

"Tune in your instruments to Paris," said the great man. "The noted astronomer, La Rue, has something of importance to tell us. Do this at once," he added, and his voice took on a somewhat sterner quality.

I arose somewhat shakily, and fumbled futilely with the dials.

"Put on more speed there, Griffin," said Marden.

It was the first time I had ever heard him speak in any other than a courteous manner, and I realized he was greatly perturbed. I fumbled awhile longer until Ed Zutell spoke up.

"Can I help, Jim?" he asked.

"Only by shutting up and staying that way," I growled, at the same time giving a vicious twist to the stubborn long distance dial.

In a little while I had it: Paris, France, observatory of Leon La Rue. We all instantly recognized the bearded Frenchman of astronomical fame; he who with Henry Shipley had informed the world of the fate of Mars. He was speaking in his quick decisive way with many gesticulations.

"I repeat for the benefit of any tardy listeners that Earth is about to suffer the fate of Mars. I will take no time for any scientific explanations. You have had those in the past and many of you have scoffed at them. It is enough to tell you positively that we are leaving the sun at a terrific rate of speed and are plunging into the void of the great Unknown. What will be the end no man knows. Our fate rests in the hands of God.

"Now hear, my friends, and I hope the whole world is listening to what I say: Choose wisely for quarters where you will have a large supply of food, water and fuel (whether you use atomic energy, electricity, oil, or even the old-fashioned coal). I advise all electrical power stations to be used as stations of supply, and the men working there will be the real heroes who will save the members of their respective communities. Those

who possess atomic heat machines are indeed fortunate. There is no time for detailed directions. Go—and may your conduct be such that it will be for the future salvation of the human race in this crisis."

The picture faded, leaving us staring with white faces at each other.

"I'll get the children," screamed Vera, but I caught her arm.

"You'll do nothing of the kind. We must not any of us be separated. The children will return when they are thoroughly cold."

My prediction was correct. The words had scarcely left my lips when the three ran into the hall crying. It was growing insufferably cold. We all realized that. We rushed about in addle-pated fashion, all talking at once, grabbing up this and that until we were acting like so many demented creatures.

Suddenly a voice, loud and stern, brought us to our senses. It was young Marden who was speaking.

"We are all acting like fools," he cried. "With your permission I will tell you what to do if you want to live awhile longer."

His self-control had a quieting effect upon the rest of us. He continued in lower tones, but with an undeniable air of mastery, "My observatory across the street is the place for our hibernation. It is heated by atomic energy, so there will be no danger of a fuel shortage. Ed, will you and Mrs. Zutell bring from your home in your car all the provisions you have available at once? Jim" (I rather winced at being addressed in so familiar a manner by a man younger in years than myself, but upon this occasion my superior), "you and Mrs. Griffin load your car with all your available food. I was going to add that you buy more, but an inevitable stampede at the groceries might make that inadvisable at present. My wife and I will bring all the concentrated food we have on hand—enough for two or three years, I think, if carefully used. Kiddies," he said to the three who stood looking from one to the other of us in uncomprehending terror, "gather together all the coats and wraps you find here in the Griffin house!"

A new respect for this man possessed me as we all set about carrying out his orders.

"You watch the children and gather together provisions," I called to Vera. "I am going to see if I can't get more from the store. We must have more concentrated and condensed foods than we are in the habit of keeping on hand for daily use. Such foods will furnish a maximum amount of nourishment with a minimum bulk."

4

I OPENED the door but returned immediately for my overcoat. The breath of winter was out of doors, though it was the month of June. The streets were lighted, and in the imperfect glow I could see panicky figures flitting to and fro. I hurried toward the square, which was exactly what everyone else seemed to be doing. A man bumped my elbow. Each of us turned and regarded the other with wide eyes. I recognized old Sam McSween.

"My God, Griffin," he cried, "what does it all mean? Ella's been laid up for a week—no food, and I thought I'd——"

I left him to relate his woes to the next passer-by. My goal was Barnes' Cash Grocery. There was a mob inside the store, but old man Barnes, his son and daughter and two extra clerks were serving the crowd as quickly as possible. Guy Barnes' nasal tones reached my ears as I stood shivering in the doorway.

"No—terms are strictly cash, friends."

"Cash!" bawled a voice near my ear. "What good will cash do you, pard, in the place we're all headed for?"

"I have cash, Guy. Gimme ten dollars worth o' canned goods and make it snappy," yelled another.

Petty thievery was rife, but no one was vested with authority to attempt to stop it. One thought actuated all: to get food, either by fair means or foul.

At length I found myself near the counter frantically waving in the air a ten-dollar bill and two ones.

"You've always let me have credit for a month or two at a time, Guy," I said coaxingly.

The old grocer shook his head in a determined manner. "Cash is the surest way to distribute this stuff fairly. The bank's open, Jim, but the mob's worse there than here, they tell me."

I shrugged my shoulders in resignation. "Give me ten dollars worth of condensed milk, meat tablets, some fruits and vegetables."

He handed me my great basket of groceries and I forced a passage through the crowd and gained the street. There were fewer people on the square than there had been an hour earlier. On their faces had settled a grim resignation that was more tragic than the first fright had been.

On the corner of Franklin and Main Streets I met little Dora Schofield, a playmate of Eleanor's. She was crying pitifully, and the hands that held her market basket were purple with the cold that grew more intense every moment.

"Where are you going, Dora?" I asked.

"Mother's ill and I am going to Barnes' grocery for her," replied the little girl.

"You can never get in there," I said. My heart was wrung at the sight of the pathetic little figure. "Put your basket down and I'll fill it for you. Then you can hurry right back to mother."

She ceased her crying and did as I bade her. I filled her smaller basket from my own.

"Now hurry home," I cried, "and tell your mother not to let you out again."

I had a walk of five blocks before me. I hurried on with other scurrying figures through the deepening gloom. I lifted my eyes to the sky and surveyed the black vault above. It was noon, and yet it had every appearance of night. Suddenly I stopped and gazed fixedly at a heavenly body, the strangest I had ever seen. It did not seem to be a star, nor was it the moon, for it was scarcely a quarter the size of the full moon.

"Can it be a comet?" I asked, half aloud.

Then with a shock I realized it was our sun, which we were leaving at an inconceivably rapid rate. The thought appalled me, and I stood for some seconds overwhelmed by the realization of what had occurred.

"I suppose Venus will give us a passing thought, as we did Mars, if she even——"

My train of thoughts came to an abrupt conclusion as I became aware of a menacing figure approaching me from Brigham Street. I tried to proceed, assuming a jaunty air, though my emotions certainly belied my mien. I had recognized Carl Hovarder, a typical town bully with whom I had had a previous unfortunate encounter when serving on a civic improvement committee.

"Drop them groceries and don't take all day to do it neither," demanded Hovarder, coming to a full stop and eyeing me pugnaciously.

"This is night, not day, Carl," I replied quietly.

"Don't you 'Carl' me!" roared the bully. "Hand over that grub, and I don't mean maybe!"

I stooped to place the basket of pro-

visions upon the walk between us, but at the same time I seized a can. As Carl bent to pick up the basket I threw the can with all the strength I possessed full at his head. He crumpled up with a groan and I snatched the precious burden and fled. When I was a block away I looked back and saw him rise and stoop uncertainly. He was picking up the can with which I had hit him. I did not begrudge him the food contained therein. That can had done me more good than it could ever possibly do Carl Hovarder.

The last lap of my journey proved the most tedious, for I was suffering with cold, and depressed at the fate of humanity, but at last I spied the observatory.

5

THE grassy knoll upon which this edifice stood had an elevation of about twenty feet and the building itself was not less than forty feet high, so that an observer at the telescope had an unobstructed view of the heavens. The lower floor was equipped as a chemical laboratory, and in its two large rooms college classes had met during the school term in chemistry and astronomy. The second story, I thought, could be used as sleeping quarters for the nine souls who felt certain the observatory would eventually be their mausoleum.

"All in?" I shouted as I ran into the building and slammed the door behind me. How welcome was the warmth that enveloped me!

"Yes, we're all in, and I suspect you are, too, judging from appearances," laughed Vera.

I looked from one to another of the little group and somehow I felt that though each tried to smile bravely, grim tragedy was stalking in our midst.

Late in the afternoon I thought of our radio and televisio, and decided to run over to the house and get them. The streets were deserted and covered with several inches of snow, and the cold was intenser than I had ever experienced. A few yards from the observatory lay a dark object. I investigated and found it to be a dog frozen as stiff as though carved from wood, and that in a few hours! My lungs were aching now as I looked across the street at our home, and though I wanted the instruments badly I valued life more highly. I turned and retraced my steps to the observatory.

The men were disappointed that we were to be so cut off from communication with the outside world, but the essentials of life were of primary importance. We swallowed our disappointment then and many times in the future when from time to time we missed the luxuries of modern life to which we had been accustomed.

Later, while the children were being put to bed, we men ascended the steps to the telescope room where we gazed ruefully at the diminishing disk of the luminary that had given life to this old Earth of ours for millions of years.

"I suppose that's the way old Sol looked to the Martians before the days of our system's disruption," commented Ed with a side glance in my direction.

"The inhabitants of Mars saw a larger orb in their heavens than that," replied Oscar, adjusting the instrument. "We are well beyond the confines of our solar system. What do you see there, boys?"

We looked alternately through the eyepiece and beheld a bright star slightly smaller than our once glorious sun now appeared to be.

"That is Neptune," explained Marden, "the outermost planet of the system."

"So we are entering the unknown! Whither are we bound, Marden?" I

cried, suddenly overwhelmed with the awfulness of it all.

The young astronomer shrugged his shoulders. "I do not know. But we shall not be the only dead world hurtling through space! The void is full of them. I think it was Tennyson who wrote——"

"Never mind Tennyson!" I fairly shrieked. "Tell me, do you think this is the—the end?"

He nodded thoughtfully and then repeated: "Lord Tennyson wrote, 'Many a planet by many a sun may roll with the dust of a vanished race'."

"Say, this is as cheerful as a funeral service," said Zutell. "I'm going down with the women. I can hear them laughing together. They've got more grit and pluck than we have. You two old pessimists can go on with your calamity-howling. I'm going to get a few smiles yet before I look like a piece of refrigerator meat."

"Ed's right for once," I laughed. "We can't help matters this way."

6

I SHOULD gain nothing by a detailed account of the flight of Earth through interplanetary space. Seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks and months lost their significance to the isolated inhabitants of a world that had gone astray. Since time had always been reckoned by the movements of the Earth in relation to the sun there was no way to ascertain the correct passage of time. True, a few watches among the members of our group aided in determining approximately the passage of time in accordance with the old standards to which we had been accustomed. How we missed the light of day, no being can imagine who has never experienced what we lived through.

"Is the moon still with us?" I asked one time of Marden.

"I can not ascertain definitely," he replied. "With no sunlight to reflect to Earth from its surface, it has eluded my observation so far, but I have imagined a number of times that a dark object passes periodically between us and the stars. I shall soon have my observations checked up, however. How I do miss radio communication, for doubtless such questions are being discussed over the air pro and con! We are still turning on our axis, but once in every twenty-seven hours instead of twenty-four. I don't understand it!"

Oscar spent virtually all his time in the observatory. He did not always reward the rest of us with his discoveries there, as he was naturally taciturn. When he spoke it was usually because he had something really worth while to tell us.

"You remember I told you that the Earth continued to rotate, though slowly, on its axis even though it no longer revolved around the sun," he said on the day we completed approximately five months of our interstellar wandering. "I also told you that should such a calamity befall the Earth as its failing to rotate, the waters would pile up and cover the continents. I have not told you before, but I have calculated that the Earth is gradually ceasing to rotate. However, we need not fear the oceans, for they are solid ice. I may also add that with this decrease in our rate of rotation there is a great acceleration in our onward flight. In less than a month we shall be plunging straight forward at many times our present rate of speed."

It was as Oscar Marden had predicted, and in a few weeks the positions of the heavenly bodies showed that Earth was hurtling straight onward at the speed of light. At the end of two years our provisions were running very low in spite of the scanty rations which we had allowed. The telescope had become our only solace for lonely hours, and through

its gigantic lens we became aware of what the future held for us. I flatter myself that I was the first to whom Oscar revealed his fearful discovery.

"Tell me what you see," he said, resigning his seat at the eyepiece to me.

"I see a very large star," I replied, "considerably larger than any near it."

He nodded. "I will tell you something that need not be mentioned to the seven below, Jim, because I can trust you to keep your head. For some weeks past I have known that we are headed for that star as straight as a die!"

I must have paled, for he glanced at me apprehensively and added, "Don't allow yourself to worry. Remember complete resignation to whatever fate is in store for us is the only way to meet natural catastrophes."

"Yes," I agreed. "Man may be the master of his own fate as regards his relation to his fellowmen, but he has no hand in an affair like this!"

"None whatever," smiled Marden, and I thought it seemed the very nicest smile in the world, except possibly Vera's.

"If we are destined to plunge headlong into this sun that lies directly in our path, and is undoubtedly what is drawing us onward, you may rest assured that human suffering will be less prolonged than if we pass this sun and continue to fathom the abyss of the eternal ether. If we were to plunge into it, the Earth would become a gaseous mass."

"Tell me," I pleaded, "is it because we are not rotating that we are threatened with this awful disaster?"

"Yes, I believe so," he answered slowly. "If we had continued to rotate we might have escaped the powerful drawing force of this sun."

7

Since young Marden had taken me into his confidence I spent many hours of each waking period, for one could not call them days, at his side studying the star which grew steadily brighter. I believe as I look back through the years of my life that the increasing magnitude of that star was the most appalling and ominous sight I had ever beheld. Many were the times that in dreams I saw the Earth rushing into the blazing hell. I invariably awoke with a scream, and covered with perspiration. I sat, it seems, for days at a time watching it, fascinated as if under the hypnotic influence of an evil eye. Finally its presence could no longer be kept a secret from the others who saw outside the windows the brightness that increased as time went on.

Printed indelibly on my memory was our first excursion out of doors after three years of confinement. Walking warily along the deserted streets, we were reminded of the ancient cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii. It was not ashes and lava that had worked the doom of hundreds of human beings; the destroyer in this case was intangible, but nevertheless potent. Many silent huddled forms were seen here and there, bringing tears to our eyes as we recognized this friend and that: but the greatest tragedies were in the homes where many whole families were discovered grouped together around whatever source of heat they had temporarily relied upon for warmth. We learned that none who had depended upon coal had survived the frigidity, and in some instances starvation had wiped out entire households.

The scene which was the greatest shock to the reconnoitering party was that staged in Guy Barnes' store. The old grocer had been game to the end, and his body was found behind the counter, where he had apparently

been overcome by the intensity of the cold, during his labors for his fellow-men. The last overwhelming cold had descended so swiftly that many had been unable to reach shelter in time.

Next came the sad task of burying our dead. Prompt action was necessary, for the ever growing disk of the great sun hastened the process of decay. The simplest of ceremonies were all that could be employed by men and women struggling to return the living world to pre-catastrophic normality.

The sun grew terrible to behold, as large in diameter as our old sun. Still it seemed good to be once more in the open! The children scampered about and Ed and I had a race to the square and back. Scorch to death we might in a very short time, but it was certainly a pleasant thing to spend a few days in this solar glow which we had been denied so long.

Came a time when we could no longer be ignorant of the fact that it was growing uncomfortably warm. Finally we decided to do as everyone else was doing; pack up our earthly possessions and move to a part of the Earth's surface where the heat was not so direct.

Ed came over, mopping his forehead with his handkerchief.

"You folks about ready?" he queried. "We're all packed up. The Mardens are going in our car."

I walked to the door and gazed across the seared landscape toward the mammoth fiery orb. Suddenly I gave a startled cry. The new sun was not in its accustomed place in the heavens. It was several degrees lower down, and to the east!

"Look!" I cried, pointing with trembling finger. "My God—do you see?"

I think Ed concluded I had gone insane, but he followed the direction of my gaze.

"Jim, old fellow, you're right," he ejaculated, "as sure as Mars was farther from the sun than we were, that sun is setting, which means——"

"That we are rotating on our axis and probably revolving around the new sun," I finished triumphantly. "But we are turning from east to west instead of from west to east as formerly. If the whole world wasn't temperate nowadays I should think I had been imbibing some of the poisonous drink of our ancestors!"

8

THAT evening the townspeople who had not already migrated to cooler regions, held a jubilee in Central Park Square. The principal speaker of the evening was Oscar Marden, who explained to the people what capers our planet had been cutting during the past three years. After his address I noticed that he kept gazing skyward as if unable to bring his attention to Earth.

"Say, will you come to the observatory with me now?" he asked as I was talking to a group of friends shortly afterward.

"I'll be right along," I replied.

Scarcely half a block away we saw Ed Zutell going in the general direction of home.

"Do we want him?" I asked, not a little annoyed. "Can't we beat it up an alley? I'd like this conference alone, for I know by your manner you have something important to tell me."

"In the last part of what you say you are right," responded Marden, "but in the first part, wrong. I do want Ed, for I have something to show him, too."

When the three of us were again in the familiar setting of the past three years, Marden gazed for quite some time at the heavens through the great instrument. Finally he turned

(Continued on page 141)

SALEM

(Reprint)

By EDMUND CLARENCE STEDMAN

Soe, Mistress Anne, faire neighbour myne,
  How rides a witche when nighte-winds blowe?
Folk say that you are none too goode
To joyne the crews in Salem woode,
When one you wot of gives the signe;
  Righte well, methinks, the pathe you knowe.

In Meetinge-time I watched you well,
  Whiles godly Master Parris prayed;
Your folded hands laye on your booke;
But Richard answered to a looke
That fain would tempt him unto hell,
  Where, Mistress Anne, your place is made.

You looke into my Richard's eyes
  With evil glances shamelesse growne;
I found about his wriste a hair,
And guessed what fingers tyed it there;
He shall not lightly be your prize,
  Your Master firste shall take his owne.

'Tis not in nature he should be
  (Who loved me soe when Springe was greene)
A childe, to hange upon your gowne!
He loved me well in Salem Towne
Until this wanton witcherie
  His harte and myne crept dark betweene.

Last Sabbath night, the gossips saye,
  Your goodman missed you from his side.
He had no strength to move, until
Agen, as if in slumber still,
Beside him at the dawne you laye:
  Tell nowe, what meanwhile did betide.

Dame Anne, mye hate goe with you fleete
  As driftes the Bay fogg overhead
Or over yonder hill-topp where
There is a tree ripe fruite shall bear
When, neighbour myne, your wicked feet
  The stones of Gallowes Hill shall tread.

A Five-Minute Story

The Elixir of Life

By MARC R. SCHORER and AUGUST W. DERLETH

THE swinging lantern at the farther end of the narrow street approached closer and closer the house of Messer Girolani, the magician. The lackey who carried the bobbing light walked swiftly, spurred on by the mutterings of the hooded figure behind him. The night was lighted by the silver moon hanging in the sky, yet but a single moonbeam penetrated the darkness of the strait alley.

Messer Girolani sat alone in the heavily curtained room which he chose to call his *laboratorium*. The multi-colored liquids in the numerous phials about the room were in odd contrast to the black curtains on all sides. On the oaken table well toward the center of the room stood three large retorts, two or them partly filled with a colorless fluid. The only light in the room was that thrown by the fitful fire from which the hungry flames leaped upward and licked the pot suspended from a tripod above them. The weird shadows danced grotesquely on the black draperies. Messer Girolani's shadow, too, was grotesque, for his long nose and straggly beard made it look for all the world like that of Mephistopheles. Messer Girolani's gaze was fixed upon the hour-glass on the shelf above the fireplace. He watched the grains of sand trickle slowly downward, half eagerly, half apprehensively, with the air of one who expected some event of import to occur. The flickering lantern in the street caught his eye and he rose hurriedly and walked directly to the fireplace, where he stirred the boiling fluid in the vessel.

The dull rap on the heavy door was answered by the soft padding of feet in the passageway. Messer Girolani's Nubian servitor admitted the hooded figure and his lackey. There was a swish of curtains brushed aside and the man stood in the room, his hood raised.

"Messer Duca——" faltered Girolani.

"Indeed, it is I, Messer Girolani."

"You are on time, my lord."

"It is my business to make that a point, Messer."

"But, of course, my lord."

"I have no doubt that my order is filled?"

His Magnificence, the Duke di Sforza, reached for the embroidered purse dangling from the belt about his doublet.

"I greatly fear, your Excellency——"

The duke waved a jeweled hand and silenced the wizard.

"Come, come, Messer Girolani, you, a magician—what is there for you to fear? Are you not allied with Satan, the root of evil?"

"But, my lord, I have not the elixir completed."

"What, knave, not completed? I am of half a mind to place your head on a pike pole. What is the reason for this?"

"It is because I lack an ingredient, Excellency."

"An ingredient? Blood of Satan! Have I not given you orders to spare

no sum in this matter? What ingredient is it you lack?"

"It is—one that gold can not procure."

"Name it! Play not with idle words."

"The life-blood of a child, Magnificence."

"The life-blood of a child?"

"Indeed, my lord."

The Duke di Sforza pondered a space. At length he glanced up.

"Summon the lackey who admitted me."

"As you say, Excellency."

Messer Girolani vanished between the curtains, but returned almost at once, followed by the silent Nubian.

"Order him to bring here for your use the first child he encounters on the streets of the city."

"You heard, Nara?"

The Nubian nodded and trod softly from the room. Once more Messer Girolani stirred the boiling liquid over the fire. He turned the hour-glass about and faced the scowling duke.

"How long, Messer Girolani, before the elixir of life will be completed?"

"Until the hour-glass drains thrice, Magnificence. The elixir is finished but for the blood of the child."

His Excellency rose and lowered the black hood. He wrapped his cloak about him and stepped into the passageway.

"When the hour-glass drains thrice, Messer Girolani, I shall return."

He was gone and Messer Girolani was alone again, watching the endless stream of sand in the hour-glass.

INCESSANTLY trickled the sand in the glass. Twice the wizard turned it. Somewhere in the gloomy abode a door closed softly. Impatient and apprehensive, Messer Girolani trod the oaken floor with a step that reverberated through the corridors without. The dancing flames of the fire increased the gloom by the fantastic shadows they threw about the chamber. There was no sound save the tread of the magician and the crackling fire. At length the draperies parted and the swarthy Nubian entered, a naked child stretched limply upon his great arms.

Silently he laid his burden upon the table. Messer Girolani pointed to a case at the farther end of the room, and murmured a command. The black turned and was lost in the dusk at the end of the room where the flickering light could not penetrate. He reappeared out of the shadows and the fitful flames flashed ominously on the sharp-edged blade he carried. He handed it to his master, and at the wizard's order, he grasped the unconscious boy and moved toward the fireplace. The servant held the body firmly, and with an evil calmness the magician slashed the throat of the still form. The body quivered spasmodically as the red blood spurted from the gash into the seething liquid in the pot.

MESSER GIROLANI reseated himself and stared meditatively into the flames. For a long time he sat thus, pondering. The body of the unfortunate child lay at full length on the table, covered with a heavy cloth. At length the alchemist started up and replenished the fire, and turned the hour-glass. As he turned from the fireplace he faced the Duke di Sforza, who had entered silently. The firelight flickered horribly on his drawn features.

"Quick, Messer Girolani, the elixir!"

"A space, Messer Duca, a space."

The wizard grasped a goblet and walked quickly to the fireplace. He bent over the pot and dipped out a bit of the life-giving fluid. There was a rattle of coins as his Magnificence cast his pouchful of ducats upon the table. Messer Girolani took it

eagerly and surrendered the elixir. The duke waited a time for the elixir to cool, then raised the goblet to his lips and drained it.

"Faugh! It has a filthy taste, Messer, but if it accomplishes half of what is said about it, its taste is pardonable."

"And that it will, my lord."

"Another goblet, Messer Girolani. I must make haste, for this night has my youngest son escaped his nurse and is now at large in the byways of Milan."

"At once, Excellence."

"What is it you have beneath the cloth upon this table, Messer?"

"It is the dead child, Magnificence. Your love of life has deprived him of it."

The duke drained the goblet. He rose, pulled his cloak about him, and started for the door, only to halt before the curtain. He walked slowly back and stood before the silent form beneath the cloth. Tentatively he stretched forth a hand, but withdrew it.

"For three hours have we searched for my son, Messer Girolani."

Again he stretched forth a hand, and again he hesitated. Messer Girolani said nothing, but his face betrayed his thoughts. Suddenly, spasmodically, the duke snatched away the coverlet, but his nerveless fingers dropped the cloth as if it were fire. He shouted hoarsely and recoiled from the accusing body. His face blanched. He gave a low moan and stared about for the magician. But Messer Girolani had gone, and he was alone with the mutilated body of his own son, whose blood was the elixir of life.

GHOSTS

By LOUISE GARWOOD

Who tapped upon my window pane
And sighed and laughed and sighed again,
  Till I called aloud so the stillness heard
  A sweet, a long-unspoken word?
Was it only wind and rain?

Yesterday, with whisper slight,
Footfalls followed me, quick and light,
  Fluttering, restless close behind:
  Who went where my garden pathways wind?
Dry leaves of crimson bright?

Who wails my name with sobbing cry
So that I wake and weeping lie?
  A string of the violoncello broke,
  In its dusty case—but yet—who spoke?
Who sighs? Who passes by?

Here Are the Thrilling Last Chapters of

THE DEVIL-RAY

By JOEL MARTIN NICHOLS, Jr.

The Story So Far

LINDLEY FENSHAW, seeking his father, a great scientist who has been kidnaped from the University of California, crashes into a mirror while chasing a thief, and loses his memory from the blow. He becomes a master thief and five years later the sudden shock of seeing himself full-length in a pier-glass restores him to full memory of his former identity, while, as Ferris (the master thief) he is robbing the safe of the Castle Blennerhof in Austria.

He remembers nothing of his life as Ferris, nothing of the purple ray that swept down out of the clouds from a speeding airplane and killed all vegetation in its path, nothing of the death of his accomplice, known as the Spider, when the purple ray touched him two nights before as he was swimming away from Castle Blennerhof. But he remembers that two days ago, on the night when the purple death killed the Spider, he had seen his father's haggard, emaciated face behind a barred window at the castle.

Now he is set upon by Colonel Von Schaang, a brutal German from whom he had rescued Baron Blennerhof's American niece a few days before (although of this he has no recollection). Colonel Von Schaang tells him that they have extorted from Lindley's father the secret of the Leipische Ray, the purple death that will destroy everything it touches; that Baron Blennerhof in his armored car has already left with the purple ray to meet the former Kaiser (now returned from exile); that a monarchist uprising in three countries will destroy the republicans; that in three days they will be in Paris, and in two days more, in England, as nothing can withstand the purple ray.

Young Fenshaw and Colonel Von Schaang fight, and the German is killed. But the armored car with the deadly Leipische Ray contrivance is already nearly an hour on its way.

CHAPTER 6

THE MAN IN THE TOWER

LINDLEY awoke with his head in the girl's arms. She had procured a strip of linen from somewhere and had bound up the cut in his side.

"You are weak," said said; "you must rest."

The sweet perfume from her clothing soothed him. He would have sunk back again in welcome oblivion but there came to him, more sharply now, the memory of the gray-haired man in the turret of Blennerhoff.

"My father," he said, pulling away from the girl and dragging himself to his feet. "I can not wait here. The castle—where is it?"

She led him to the window. The storm had subsided. Only a few scudding clouds effaced the moon. She pointed down the lake to where, more eery now than before under the wan light, Blennerhof thrust its five gloomy turrets into the sky.

"If you trust me, now," she said, "I will go with you."

He looked at her, noted the light in her eyes. "I never really doubted you," he said, "but I was nervous and I could not afford to lose. It is not for myself. Come, we will go."

She was but a moment in donning some extra clothing, and together they hurried from the villa into the roadway. He had paused only long enough to pick up the German's pistol under the window, and then they crept out and down the road, trembling lest at this last moment they be discovered by the servants in the quarters at the rear.

In twenty minutes, though it seemed as many hours to him, they were at the castle.

"The drawbridge is all the way down," she whispered. "I have never seen it thus before. But then—they never would let me go near the place. They said it was old and the walls might fall."

They hurried over the bridge and into the somber courtyard.

Two doors yawned emptily before them. The great steel car was gone! Von Schaang had not boasted without truth.

Lindley paused in the center of the courtyard, buried in thought. "Yes," he said finally, "I am sure that I have been here before. I remember there was a great armored car in there and then we found a stairway somewhere and went up into one of the turrets. It seems to me now that it was on the left."

They hurried over to the nearest turret and found a low oaken door heavily studded with iron. It was partly open and creaked ominously as he swung it farther back. He snapped off his flashlight and they waited there in the darkness, their hearts pounding with fear. Had they been heard? From above there came no sound save the moan of the wind among the battlements, weird music intermingling uncannily with the murmur of the waters in the moat below. The place seemed as empty as a tomb.

He paused with one foot on the stairs. "I can not let you go up here," he said. "There is sure to be someone there, and I shall have to fight. I—I'm sorry that I brought you thus far. Will you go back and wait for me on the shore? If I do not come back within a few minutes you will know that I——"

She laid her hand on his arm. "I am going with you," she answered with quiet finality. Had it not been for the pitchy blackness perhaps he would have noticed that she swayed a little toward him. And so they crept up the stairs together.

At the parapet above, Lindley leaned cautiously over. He waited for the moon, effaced for the moment by a fleeting cloud, to throw its light into the castle. The greenish light came —vanished. Yet in that quick interval he saw the pile of coal, still wet and glistening from the rain. He saw beside it the two small barrows. But the waving plume of steam from the exhaust in the far corner was gone. There came now no drone of dynamos from the tiny powerhouse beyond.

They had gone, indeed! Their work here was finished.

And yet the silent emptiness of it gave him some grain of comfort. He had found the stairs, the turret, the coal—everything as it had been in his dream. Then it had not been a dream after all. If he could find the barred window wherein he had seen the dials and the two workmen he would then believe that he had in reality seen his father.

They found the embrasure at last—just where he had placed it in his mind. Peering through he saw in the gloom those same shining knobs and dials, that same huge hourglass apparatus. But there was in it now no forking ray of purple light.

Gone! Gone! In bitterness he realized that although it had been no dream, he had come too late. Too late! And then he felt the girl's fingers on his arm.

"Look up at the keep," she whispered. "There is a light above us in the keep." His eyes followed her pointing finger in the gloom, and then he saw far above them a tiny embrasure throwing a feeble yellow ray into the night.

Without a word he led her back down into the courtyard, where they finally discovered the door to the keep. Through a clutter of strange machinery they found steps leading upward.

They climbed an interminable length of time, it seemed to him, and yet it was only a minute or so. At every turn in the tortuous stairway they paused, waiting there in the darkness with thumping hearts, expecting momentarily to hear some challenge from above, perhaps the crash of a pistol. On the seventh

landing he made out ahead of them a closed door. Leaving her one landing below he crept up to the door and applied his ear to a narrow crack. From within there came no sound, no stir that he could hear. His heart, he thought, thumped too loudly to permit of hearing anything else. By a supreme effort he sought to quiet it. And then, as he listened, not daring to breathe, he caught a faint murmur from behind the door. It was light breathing. The regularity of it told that there were two of them and that both were sleeping.

He pushed his shoulder against the door. It gave easily. There before him, lit by a small swinging lamp overhead, he saw two men. One was an old man stretched out on a pallet of straw in the corner, the other a heavy-built person with pistol at belt, slumped into a chair near the bed on which the old man lay. Even as he watched there in the doorway cold horror struck home to his heart, for he realized that the slight form on the straw bed was his father, and that his father was chained! Thank heaven, then, the old man had not submitted willingly!

But his father chained!

The blood seemed to well up into his eyes. He bounded into the room, all caution gone now. The clatter awoke the sleeper in the chair, and in an instant the man was facing him, his hand going swiftly to the pistol at his belt. In that instant Lindley's arms locked about the man's waist, holding his arms there impotently. He dared not trust to his own pistol lest the report bring the whole castle against them.

He did not know that the girl hurried up the stairs behind him nor did he hear her low cry as she ran to the old man on the straw pallet. He did hear his father's cry of "Lindley! Lindley!" All that mind could encompass now was an insane hatred for this burly beast locked in his arms. He wondered why the man did not cry out and give the alarm. Perhaps they were alone in the castle. Perhaps—but he was not sure enough of it to use his pistol.

In a few seconds he knew that he was likely to have the best of it. The man in his arms seemed curiously inept at this struggle—seemed to be attempting to wrench away rather than reach for his assailant's throat as Lindley anticipated.

Suddenly he realized that the guard had a definite purpose in the struggle. He seemed to be working the two of them across the room. Lindley found himself trying to speculate on this movement—it was not in the direction of the door and the embrasure was too small to allow the passage of his body. Even if it had been wider there remained outside only a death on the rocks below. Then, through many intervening miles, he heard his father calling to him. What was that?

"Do not let him pull that switch!" The old man's voice came to him now, full and clear.

What did his father mean? Was there some sort of a signal. At that instant the man in his grip tore one arm free and reached out to the wall. For the first time Lindley saw there a small electric switch, but on that instant the guard's big hand closed over it and a tiny bluish spark told him it had gone home. With that, Lindley struck, pistol in hand, and the body went limp in his arms.

"Quick! Quick!" the scientist shouted. "That switch releases a mechanism which in eighteen minutes will set off bombs in the moat! They intended blowing themselves up if ever they were caught! There is another switch concealed somewhere below to cut it off, but we could never find it in eighteen minutes!"

Lindley's feverish fingers found keys on the guard's body. It seemed hours before they were able to un-

lock the steel fetters on Fenshaw's wrists. It seemed a thousand steps to the courtyard below. The scientist glanced at his watch. "Fourteen minutes left," he said. "Time enough to get well out of here and far enough away if we hurry."

They were half-way across the drawbridge when Lindley suddenly paused. The airplane! Was it still down there in the moat? He rushed to the wall, and peering over into the gloom, saw it snugly ensconced there in the black waters, intact and waiting.

Father and son looked at each other in silence. Each knew what the other was thinking. "They've been gone now about an hour and a half," said the scientist. "They can not be far. In forty-five minutes we should overtake them, if you can fly a Fokker."

He paused, and Lindley knew what he was thinking. If they went after the speeding car they themselves stood one chance in a thousand of ever coming back alive. That car must be destroyed. It would mean death—of course. Their only hope would be to drive the plane into the face of the speeding motor, wreck it beyond recovery and all those within it. Probably death for the men in the car, but most certain death for those in the plane.

"We must do it!"

The scientist nodded and stepped toward the edge of the bridge. Lindley turned to the girl. "You have time enough to get out of the castle, but you must hurry," he said. "My father and I are going with the plane. We—the baron—it will be the end for him and for us. I'm sorry, I—well, you see we must do it. It is for our country—we have no choice. Come—you must hurry." His voice choked.

He attempted to push her toward the end of the bridge but she pulled away from him. "But I, too, am an American," she said. "My father loved America and my mother died for it. I can not—will not let you go alone. I have come thus far. I will see you through—to whatever comes. Is it not enough that—I—I—" She did not finish.

He wanted to say something, but the words choked him. And then he saw that she swayed toward him.

The scientist, looking back, saw only one figure where there had been two in the gloom near the end of the bridge. The moon, whipped from behind a cloud for the moment, smiled down upon them. Youth—youth! The scientist saw her coming toward him with his son behind her.

"I'm going." It was all she said. Being an old man and understanding, he did not reply.

They found the dock under the draw and tumbled hastily down upon it. Lindley, peering in at the gages, found the tanks partly full.

"Eight minutes more," came the scientist's voice from the gloom.

Lindley had started over the decks toward the engines when his eyes caught the white bellies of steel cylinders hanging there quietly in the water under the bridge. And then he remembered.

Bombs! Bombs! Enough to blow the castle into the heavens. Three of them taken into the plane and dropped from aloft would be enough to do the trick—enough to destroy that speeding monster. Feverishly he sought among the tools for pliers and wrench.

"Seven minutes!"

A cold chill struck through the younger man's spine. He knew they would need at least four minutes to get away. God knew how far they would have to be in order to escape the impending cataclysm. "The bombs in the moat!" he shouted. "We need only three of them! Help me!"

They pulled the ship closer to the

drawbridge, and Lindley, reaching down into the water, found three of those cylinders of death, clipped their wiring and handed them gingerly up to his father, who crouched in the forward cockpit. The question now was —would they explode if dropped from a sufficient height?

"Three minutes left," said the professor. "We can't wait any longer." Lindley dragged himself back to the deck, slipped into the pilot's seat and adjusted the controls. The scientist pulled himself out of the cockpit and climbed over to the propellers. At Lindley's direction he seized one of the blades and twisted it sharply.

Would she start?

The port engine opened up with a deafening roar. The professor scrambled to the other side and repeated the operation on the other propeller. A sputtering report reassured them. But another minute gone! Could they make it? If they got caught now between the bridge and the wall of the moat they would be done for. The plane lashed out drunkenly under the pull of her propellers. Lindley released her and sprang back to his controls. Could he make the passage?

She slid out, scraping only her starboard wing. He unleashed her and swung her into the wind, raising her wing control for the long lift upward. There could be but a minute left! He wondered if there could be even that much, expecting with each fleeting second to hear that splitting roar behind him. This waiting for the ship to take the air was worse than death itself. He glanced to the seat at his left and saw the white face of the girl, saw her glance back to the castle. Ahead of him his father was gazing back at the slowly increasing distance between them and the death that lay behind. Would the plane never rise? How the water seemed to cling to her pontoons, how it hated to release her! Ah, she was free now! The lake below seemed to fall away! They were up at last!

He saw his father peering at his watch, fancied that he himself could see the hands set at the hour of death. The professor raised his hand. . .

Lindley felt the murderous red glare of it on his back before the splitting crash smote across his eardrums. The plane rocked drunkenly, dipped her nose and plunged downward. They were not far enough up, they could not afford a nose dive now! The water below—it was still too near! Two years over the lines in Flanders had served him well. Automatically he pulled at the controls. She rocked; the struts sang out even above the roar of the propellers. Would something give way now? One little snap—and oblivion!

There was a second roaring crash behind them, this time not so loud. The red glare lit up the heavens. Would some of this hurtling debris reach the ship, strike her down? Something sang past his head. A bit of mortar in one of those engines—a smashed propeller——

Bits of brick, stone and mortar flung past them, thumped against the ship's body, pattered on her wings—and dropped into the void beneath them. Back of them the red glare was subsiding to a sulky, sanguine glow. It was the end of Blennerhof.

LINDLEY veered to the right and they picked up the lake road. They followed it, a narrow ribbon of gray picked out by the moonlight. The lake was left behind. If anything went wrong now they were too low to volpane to the surface of the water. It would be the end, a crash against tree or rock.

The scudding clouds which had almost continuously effaced the moon were fewer now and Lindley had little difficulty in following the road. He soared as high as possible, watching his father, who peered from the

forward cockpit into the night. Once the port engine began to skip, but it settled back once more. That steady, reassuring drone was comforting. Lindley saw the still white face beside him, wondered if she realized how close they were to their journey's end.

Twenty minutes; a half-hour; forty minutes passed. The scientist had risen now and was peering ahead into the moonlit countryside. Had they missed the car—had there been some side road into which it had turned? Had it drawn up for the moment beside the wayside while the ship roared on overhead, oblivious of its quarry?

Fifty minutes. Lindley saw his father raise his hand, saw him point far away into the night. Leaning forward he followed with his eye the pointing finger. There was nothing—no, no, there it was ten miles ahead, a huge, silver-skinned beetle on a ribbon of ashen gray! Even at that distance he caught the gleam of the moon shining on that peculiar glass dome in her steel cupola.

He saw his father reach down at his feet and laboriously hoist one of the heavy cylinders to the lip of the cockpit. Fumbling nervously with the controls he dipped the ship downward as far as he dared. It was necessary to be close. It would not be an easy shot. The bombs were clumsy cylinders, unwinged, and not intended for such work. He wondered if the force of contact would be sufficient to explode them. And the crash—if there was one—they must not be too low lest they be themselves blown into the skies!

Five miles now! Three! Two! Had they been noticed? They had one advantage—that of surprize. They would not be expected. Perhaps they could creep up near enough before their purpose was established. But now the car had evidently shot forward with increased speed. One mile flicked out behind them. Apparently they had been seen.

They were now over the speeding car! The time had come!

Lindley saw his father looking back for the signal. He raised his hand. The plane jerked upward, slightly.

No sound save the roar of their own engines! Had the thing refused to explode? But no—there was a muffled crash from below. It had exploded! But had it found its mark? He glanced over the side.

There beneath them was the speeding car—unscathed! They had missed it! He saw his father poise the second bomb on the edge of the cockpit and look back for the signal. Glancing down he saw they were still over the car. It was the moment. He raised his hand, saw the black speck hurtling earthward.

No sound this time. It had failed to explode! Lindley groaned inwardly. There was but one left. Failing this there remained only that last resort—driving the ship into the face of the speeding motor. Death for all in the car, probably. Death for all in the plane, certainly!

But what was that? A flash of purple! He saw his father recoil in the cockpit, felt his own fingers freeze on the controls!

It was the purple ray, searching for them there in the sky!

He shot the plane upward and banked sharply. One whisk of that sinister ray across the ship, one touch on the body of any of them and they would be gone! That swift turn of his had saved them for the moment. There had been just a flash of purple across her wings. He thought of his engines, knew from what he had read, that they might be stalled by the ray.

They in the car, having missed once, would try again. Turning backward he saw that purple finger in the sky behind them—searching—searching. They had evaded it for

the moment but it would find them sooner or later. . . .

Well, if it was to be the end, he would make a desperate finish of it! He saw his father motion him to bear the ship downward. To get the proper angle he swooped her first upward and then looped again, barely missing that sinister line of purple! Into the face of it then! Again he banked her sharply, saw that narrow ribbon of purple sweep across the wings, closer to the fuselage this time! Three feet nearer and it would have passed over his body!

He found himself wondering if they were merely playing with them there in the air, and ground his teeth savagely. Toward them swung that purple bar once more, and again he banked the plane until the struts sang out their warning. This time that ribbon of purple had barely missed the girl. In a short pause of the engines he heard her cry out, saw her looking backward. Turning his own eyes he saw the purple of it shining through the thin body of the ship as if it had been tissue paper!

Another swoop, a sharp bank and they were over the car once more. He raised his hand to his father, saw the old man poise their last missile on the edge of the cockpit. Into the very teeth of death now! The purple was just ahead of them, barring the way. Gritting his teeth he sped the ship directly in the path of it, slanting her downward! He would finish it that way if the last bomb failed!

The purple seemed to sear his eyes. He fought down an overpowering impulse to close them. God, he was tired! Let it come now. He found himself wondering if it would be swift. He saw the thin figure of his father in the cockpit before him, limned for a second against the glaring purple, saw him hesitate but a moment, saw the heavy cylinder hurtle over the side. That purple lane came nearer, seemed to engulf them. He closed his eyes—let it come!

A reverberating roar from below! Their last bomb had not failed them! He opened his eyes. The purple was gone! Glancing down with the roar of the bomb he saw the great gray beetle lift itself off the road, saw it shatter in a thousand pieces against the rocks that lined the hillside!

He found himself muttering, "The end—the end." He shot the ship upward into the heavens and circled there in the moonlight. Bit by bit they made it out below them—torn and twisted machinery; tons and tons, it seemed, of shattered glass; a hundred intricate wheels—two limp figures which lay together by the roadside but did not move—would move no more. The secret of the ray gone with its inventor!

The plane climbed in slow spirals. Her gas would be well expended, Lindley thought, and they must find a lake somewhere. The moon was fast fading. A few minutes more and the blackness which presaged the dawn would be under and around them, shutting out the world. He turned to the girl beside him and saw her pointing northward toward a slim patch of silver. Water and a place to land! Mechanically, he turned the ship's nose toward it, fighting a great weariness from mind and body.

They dipped down out of the heavens just as the dawn was breaking.

CHAPTER 7

THE PROFESSOR'S STORY

They left the girl at a peasant's hut on the shore of the lake and hurried back over the fields. There must be no mistake. This terrible machine must be destroyed forever. When they arrived at the spot in the roadside they found what they had hoped for. Leipische was there, dead

with his secret. Near him lay the body of Baron Blennerhof.

The professor found Leipische's hat and placed it over the dead man's eyes. "Poor Leipische," he said quietly. "If you had turned your genius to construction instead of destruction it would not have been thus. But how did you find me?" he asked, turning to Lindley eagerly.

"It was chance, or fate, or God," said Lindley. "When they gave up hope of ever finding you I went out alone. As I remember it, I went to Chicago and took the name of Ferris in order to conceal my identity. I remembered some of your experimenting during the first part of the war and it occurred to me this was no ordinary crime. In Chicago I had a little bad luck—or maybe it was good luck. I was going under the name of Ferris, hoping thereby to get some clue, when one night in a hotel there a pickpocket got my wallet. I chased the wretch through an open door and he swung it back down on me and I got a cracked skull. He had my wallet with my real papers so when I awoke in the hospital with memory gone they'd put me down as Ferris—found a cardcase in my pocket with some cards I'd had printed. I hate to be thinking what I've fallen into between then and now —a regular Jekyll and Hyde existence, I guess. In the hospital they told me I'd get my memory back some day but that it would require some sort of a shock. I was deathly afraid of mirrors, couldn't bear the sight of one. They said it was a pathological fear brought on by the crash. Two or three times I must have been on the verge of coming back—or at any rate I felt that way —but always something intervened. Once I wanted to commit murder—that was Von Schaang when I saw the girl fighting him on the road by the castle. I guess I was pretty near getting back then but the shock of it wasn't enough. It required something else and I got it with those mirrors at the villa."

He related the events in detail.

"But you," he continued. "You must have been through hell."

"I think I have," said the scientist, slowly. "It's worse when you find you've made a mistake like that, even when you've been tricked into it. It was Leipische — poor devil. I bear him no ill will now, though I could have killed him before, had he given me the chance. I suppose he's always been a little insane. Most geniuses are. I knew him first when we studied together at Bonn during our younger days. He was brilliant, far beyond any of the rest of us, but undoubtedly a little mad. He was deeply interested in electro-therapeutics, but he did not lose faith in the curing of ills by electricity as most of us came to do in latter days. I believe he carried on his long and exhaustive researches along these lines up until the time of the war.

"When he hit upon the idea of the purple ray, I do not know, but presumably it was during the war. But they never had time to develop it. They lacked one thing and that, as ill luck would have it, was the thing I had. As you know, at the university I had been experimenting with an apparatus that would permit the everyday use of X-rays of tremendous power. This has ever been our problem. We knew we could develop an I-ray of tremendous potentiality but we had trouble in controlling it. It proved as dangerous to the operator and patient as it was efficacious in the cure of cancerous growths. Eventually I hit upon and developed an apparatus which seemed to offer the adequate protection. We were keeping the thing a secret for the time being.

"Well, what I had found was just what Leipische needed. He had produced his own devil-ray but the thing

had killed several of his colleagues and nearly was his own undoing. It seemed to be as dangerous to the operator as to the enemy. Its effect on all forms of life, both animal and vegetable, is instantaneous. In the animal it inflicts a terrific shock, utterly destroying the nervous system and rupturing, probably, every blood vessel in the brain. The effect is somewhat similar to death by electric shock except there is no mark left on the body. An autopsy would be necessary to reveal what had really happened. The ray has a singular effect, too, on certain mechanical devices. For instance I have seen Leipische stop a motor with it at the distance of several feet, back there in Blennerhof. He said it choked the thing by developing an excess of carbon dioxide or nitrogen in the cylinders. Luckily they didn't have time to get at our airplane engines. They undoubtedly could have put us out of business while we were still on the horizon had they suspected in any way who we were.

"But to go on. Leipische got wind of my invention and he determined that what I had discovered in the way of protection he must have. They lay near me one night when I was working at the laboratory alone, and made me open the safe where I kept my blueprints and formulas. To cover the thing up thoroughly, they left some old prints and papers about —things that were quite useless. Naturally they had either to kidnap or kill me and they chose the former, thinking perhaps they might need me later.

"When they brought me here it was some time before I knew what they were working on, but when I did I went nearly mad. I could see what was bound to happen, and I felt that I had, by my carelessness, been contributory to it. I tried to disarm their suspicions of me by pretending an interest but they were too bright for me. They let me have the run of the castle, but always Leipische or one of the guards was at my heels. Once I tried to blow them up—pulled one of those switches, but they were ready for that and merely cut it off somewhere from below. You see, they were in mortal fear of discovery so they had taken precautions to blow everything up if ever they were discovered.

"And then that night when I saw your face at the window. That gave me hope because I supposed you had gotten track of me and were merely awaiting an opportunity to strike. I knew that they were getting ready for a *coup d' état,* and when I did not see any more of you for days I was in despair. And then the final night and you came. And now this"—he indicated with a wave of his hand the shattered debris of the wrecked car.

They sat for a long time looking at the ruin before them. Finally Lindley got up. "We'd better be getting back to the cottage," he said. "She'll be waiting for us."

They went back together toward the lake.

[THE END]

THERE has been a veritable flood of requests that WEIRD TALES be published twice a month instead of once a month as at present. There is only one way that you can bring this about, and that is to help boost the circulation of WEIRD TALES to a point where publication twice a month is feasible. Tell your friends about the magazine, and get them in the habit of reading it; for, although the circulation of WEIRD TALES is growing very rapidly, it has not yet reached a point where the publishers feel that it would be feasible to publish it twice as often as at present.

Writes G. C. Scott, of Terre Haute, Indiana: "Why not have ballots printed in back of the next issue and leave it to the readers to vote on making this a 'twice-monthly' magazine?" The ballots are not necessary, for so many letters come to us every day asking us to publish WEIRD TALES twice a month that there seems no doubt that our readers wish the magazine to be issued twice as often as it is.

E. L. Middleton, of Los Angeles, writes to The Eyrie: "I think most of the readers of WEIRD TALES who have been with you since the beginning (March, 1923) will agree that the latest issue (May, 1926) will rank as the best, or nearly the best issue ever published. The stories are magnificent, particularly *The Ghosts of Steamboat Coulee,* which ideally filled my old desire for a ghost story where the ghosts act and talk like real people, and yet are ghosts. Personally, I think that *Whispering Tunnels,* of about thirteen months ago, is the greatest single story ever published in WEIRD TALES, but *The Ghosts of Steamboat Coulee* ranks closely with it. However, other readers will favor other stories, and really it is hard to make a choice. Keep on with your present policy of arrangement and variety in the magazine. The greatest series of stories published in WEIRD TALES, I think, are the Jules de Grandin ones, particularly that wonderful *Tenants of Broussac.*"

Writes Earl Leaston Bell, of Augusta, Georgia: "*The Ghosts of Steamboat Coulee,* in the May number, was one of the best yarns W. T. has ever wrapped itself about. Burks is a genius. Give us more of his work. In my opinion the greatest story that has ever appeared in the magazine is *The Phantom Farmhouse,* by Seabury Quinn. It should have a prominent place among the best short stories ever produced in America. But why was Lovecraft missing in the May issue? He is the noblest Roman of them all."

Several readers have taken up the cudgels in behalf of *Lochinvar Lodge,* Clyde Burt Clason's story in the March issue, which was harshly criticized by many readers because of its indefinite ending. Writes Cecil Fuller, of Tulare,

California: "I want to defend *Lochinvar Lodge*. The story was a wonder, and as to the ending—it was *great*. Stories of this type, which leave something to the imagination, are worth while. Another splendid story of this type was *The Statement of Randolph Carter*, in which the outcome was left to the imagination of the reader. Let those who demand a conventional ending turn to some other magazine, but let WEIRD TALES have more stories that end in mystery."

Writes Joe Dennis, of Detroit: "I wish I could fittingly express my opinion of WEIRD TALES. It is quite impossible to praise it too highly. I was introduced to WEIRD TALES last August when a crowd of us were spending our vacations camping in a tent by the side of a lonely lake. There were many idle hours and one of the number brought along some old WEIRD TALES. I became an enthusiastic reader. The stories have a thrill not to be found in any other magazine. They are not all the same, as is so often the fault in other magazines. Some of them I shall never forget. Until WEIRD TALES came to relieve the monotony of stories based on plots long considered antique, such writers as Poe were liked because they furnished a different kind of entertainment. And now I honestly believe that their imaginations were dead, as compared with some of the contributors to your excellent magazine."

Frank Thurston, of Chicago, writes to The Eyrie: "It is impossible for me to refrain any longer from loudly proclaiming my enthusiasm for your 100 per cent readable magazine: WEIRD TALES. I will not, however, enumerate the stories of my choice—they are all first class. I certainly endorse your judgment when you link Lovecraft's bizarre works with those of the immortal Poe, for certainly his abstract account of so gruesome a character as is found in *The Outsider* (April issue) is by far the most genuine, perfectly written weird story I've had the fortune to read. *The Outsider* is a yarn that will haunt me for some time."

Writes Paul Pease, of Terre Haute, Indiana: "One year ago in December I first became acquainted with WEIRD TALES. When I had finished reading it from cover to cover, I was convinced that it was the best magazine in existence. Since that time I have not missed a copy, and will not in the future."

"Please print more stories of scientific inventions and experiments like *Duval's Weird Experiment* and *The Phantom Drug*," writes Edwin Beard, of St. Louis. "They are exceedingly interesting. I especially like the stories of Jules de Grandin and Dr. Trowbridge written by Seabury Quinn. And please print more stories of stark horror such as *Bat's Belfry*. That's a story that would send cold shivers up one's spine if he was at the equator."

Writes W. R. Kirkland, of Albany, New York: "I would like to put in a vote for an issue of your wonderful magazine twice a month and hope you soon will be able to see the great benefits that may come from such an action. Above all do keep WEIRD TALES weird; don't let such stories as *The Derelict Mine* creep in to any great extent, for while it is a good story it is out of place in WEIRD TALES, as there is nothing weird or mysterious about it. Give us more stories of other planets, more ghosts like those of Steamboat Coulee, and let us hear again very soon from the Second Cycle where dwells the Queen of the Vortex. And let us hear again from C. B. Clason—if he can not give us very shortly a hair-raising sequel to *Lochinvar Lodge* I vote that he be shot at sunrise."

W. C. McGregor, of Spokane, Washington, writes to The Eyrie: "I have every issue of WEIRD TALES from first to last, and I have them all put away and am keeping them as my most prized possession. I never pick up WEIRD

TALES and pick out stories here and there, but start at the first one and read through. My favorite authors are H. P. Lovecraft, Greye La Spina, Seabury Quinn and Arthur J. Burks. For Weird Story Reprints I suggest *The Rats in the Walls.*"

"I have found in WEIRD TALES a 'Paradise Lost,' writes Jan Guenther, of Evansville, Indiana. "By nature inclined toward a fascination for the bizarre and unusual, I found myself dissatisfied with the usual run of magazines, but by chance formed an acquaintance with your magazine, an acquaintance that has ripened into a fervent friendship. The stories you publish are all that could be desired by the most skeptical. I have read through all of Poe's works several times, and I think *The Outsider* in the April WEIRD TALES ranks with his best."

Mrs. Clara Gervais, of Chicago, writes: WEIRD TALES is the only periodical I never miss. I am a busy mother of three small children and have not much time to read, but before the first of the month I get very impatient for WEIRD TALES to arrive. *The Ghosts of Steamboat Coulee,* in the May issue, was wonderful. From its easy, homely beginning it wended its way through a series of horrors, and was not a bit forced in the whole story. The ending was most satisfactory, and I am glad the hero did not die as I expected. The author proves that a story can be weird and not leave a bad taste in the mouth."

Writes B. E. Conrad, of Columbus, Ohio: "Congratulations! Your May issue is wonderful. *The Confession of a Madman* is great; it's one of the best stories ever in WEIRD TALES. Hail to James Cocks, its author!"

You will help us to keep the magazine in accord with your wishes if you will fill out the coupon on this page and let us know which stories you like best in this issue; also which stories you do not like, if any. Your favorite story in the May WEIRD TALES, as shown by your ballots, was *The Ghosts of Steamboat Coulee,* by Arthur J. Burks. Second and third choice went to *Queen of the Vortex,* by F. Williams Sarles, and *The Dead Hand,* by Seabury Quinn.

MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE JULY WEIRD TALES ARE:

Story	Remarks
(1)----------	----------
(2)----------	----------
(3)----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

(1)---------- Why? ----------

(2)---------- ----------

It will help us to know what kind of stories you want in Weird Tales if you will fill out the coupon and mail it to The Eyrie, Weird Tales, 408 Holliday Building, Indianapolis, Ind.

Reader's name and address:

A Runaway World

(Continued from page 124)

to us with a wry smile on his lips and a twinkle in his eyes.

"Just take a peep, boys, and tell me what you see." He strove in vain to conceal his amusement.

We both agreed that we saw a rather reddish star.

"That 'reddish star'," said Oscar, impressively, "is our old friend Mars, and he is revolving in an orbit between us and the sun!"

Ed and I looked at each other speechlessly for some seconds; then without a word Ed dropped on his knees before me in something of the fashion of an Arab bowing toward Mecca.

"What's the big idea?" I asked, not a little frightened, for I wondered if the confinement of the years had crazed him.

Oscar was laughing so that he had to hold on to the telescope for support, so I concluded there was nothing very radically amiss in the situation.

"I am worshiping a god," said Ed, "for so I would call anyone who can move the planets about so that they line up in accordance with his conceptions of the way they ought to do."

"I'd like to take the credit," I laughed, then more seriously, "but a higher authority than mine has charge of the movements of the planets."

"Well, it certainly is uncanny how you have your way in everything," grumbled Ed.

9

THERE is little more to tell. The world soon adjusted itself to its new environment. People became accustomed to seeing the sun rise in the West and set in the East.

Vera was ineffably delighted with the new system of time which was necessitated by the increased orbit of

Next Month

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the Earth. Inasmuch as it now required a trifle over two years for our planet to make a journey once around the new sun, Vera figured that she was less than half her former age, and this new method of figuring, I may add, others of her sex were not slow to adopt.

The huge sun rendered the Earth habitable clear to the poles, and strange to say, it caused very little increase of heat in the tropics. Astronomers proved that, though a big sun, it was not as hot a one, for it was in the later stages of the cooling-off process to which all suns eventually come. Two planets had already been journeying around the giant sun before the advent of Mars and Earth, and what they thought of the intrusion of the two strange worlds was before long made evident through radio communication.

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Watch for This Story in
Weird Tales

Through the Vortex

(Continued from page 26)

door burst in. The three fugitives from Suferno lay upon the floor, unconscious, but with unmistakable signs of life. Two minutes later they had been carried into the nearest Pullman, and the train had been searched for a doctor.

Although greatly weakened by their ordeal, all three were soon revived. As the train proceeded Kent gave a brief explanation to their wondering rescuers. Suddenly the conductor slapped his side.

"That's where those meteors came from," he exclaimed. "We've got orders to run a bit easy on account of several huge meteors dropping around this region an hour ago. But I wonder what became of those animals you're talking about? Guess they'd not make much impression on old terra firma, though, as far as living through it, anyway. But good night! If I hadn't seen that box out there I'd wire ahead for the first asylum keeper to meet us."

He laughed and the three Sufernites joined in, though rather weakly.

"Speaking of wiring," said Kent, "I wish you'd send a message for me to the Major General Commandant of the Marine Corps. Tell him Captain Richard Kent will report at Headquarters and explain his being absent without leave for the last month or so."

As the conductor started away Kent glanced at Madeline with an odd expression. Then he leaned over and whispered something she alone could hear. The girl blushed and then gave a barely perceptible nod. Kent called after the retreating conductor.

"If you don't mind," he said with a somewhat embarrassed smile, "you might add that Captain Kent would like to have a month's leave as soon as possible—for his honeymoon."

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Fettered

(Continued from page 48)

take your brother away from you entirely. Do you understand?"

"Ewan! Come—please!" Bessie tugged at her brother's sleeve.

Like a man entranced the young artist stood, his eyes fixed on the doctor's wife, whose evil beauty flamed in that gray dawn like a thing not of earth but some other mystic plane. Gretel smiled with exasperating amusement at Bessie's anxiety.

"You may have him for now, stupid brown girl. I'm through with him tonight. When I want him again, I'll call him." Her soft laugh was cruel. "And I'll pay up Dale for bringing me into these woods to die of loneliness," she added sharply.

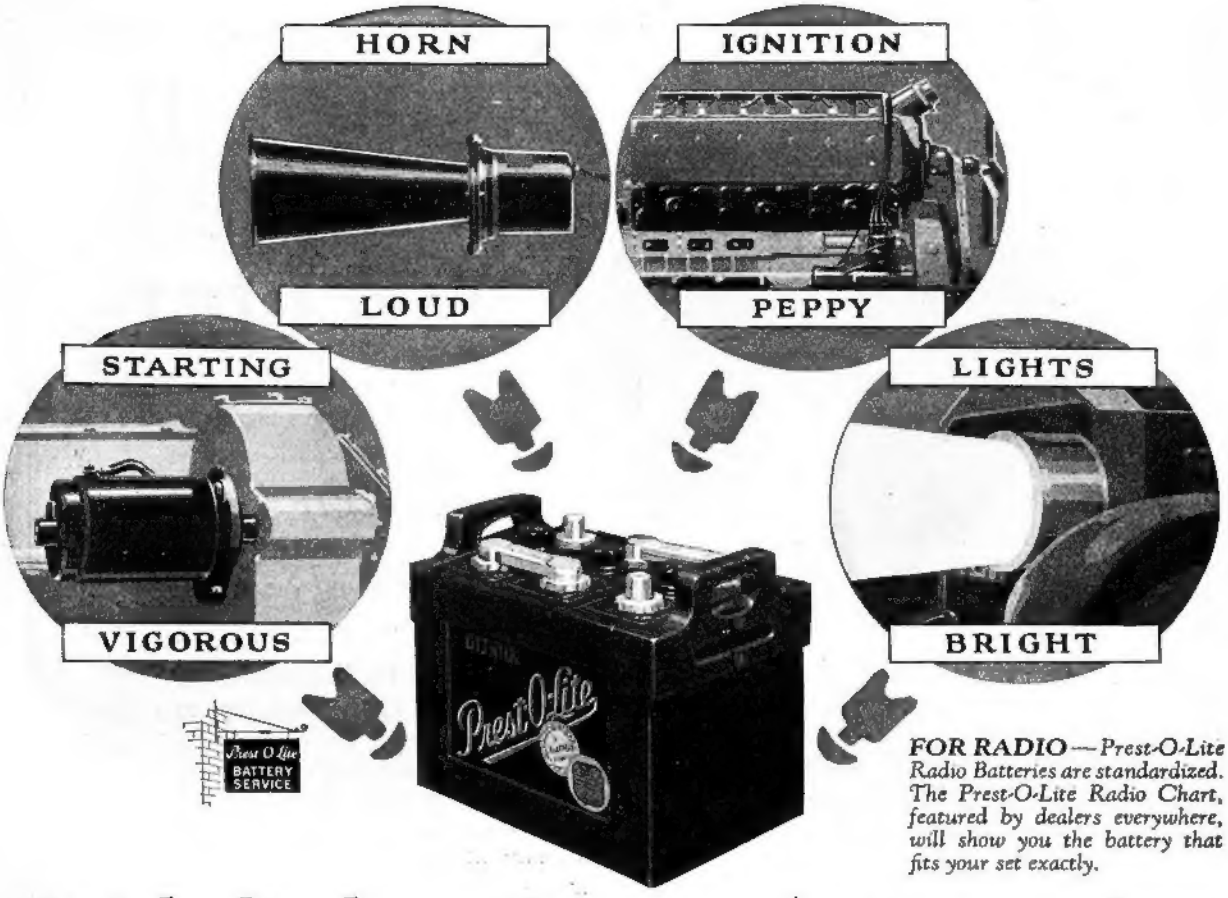
"Ewan!" Bessie was urging her brother anxiously.

"You'd be lonesome without your brother, wouldn't you, girl? Well, I'll call you, too, you little plump thing. Yes, I make it a promise. I'll call you *first*, so you won't be lonesome. Just see how kind I am!"

Bessie succeeded in drawing her brother along with her. He went down to the river-path, stumbling as if half dazed, unseeing where his feet went. Behind them, ringing out eerily through the gray morning mists, sounded the pealing of Mrs. Armitage's strange laughter, note on note.

"Both of you? All three of you. Ewan—Dale—and Bessie!" the doctor's wife was crying, between her bursts of ghastly merriment. "You shall *all* be mine!"

In next month's issue will be told how the frightful doom that gathered about Ewan and Bessie burst in all its dread horror. A thrilling story, that works up to a stupendous climax.



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